

Mountain Man – Chapter 1 – Meet Ray

By R. James Woolsey and Rachel K. Belton.

One fine morning three weeks ago, a bird landed on a wire overlooking Los Angeles. Unfortunately, the wire was a power line to Los Angeles International Airport, and the ensuing blackout delayed nearly 100 flights. Although power returned in 10 seconds, communications and air traffic control facilities were hard hit; some took hours to restore. More than an hour later, 40 delayed planes and hundreds of travelers were still circling overhead.

Such sensitivity to small events is an integral feature of all complex, interconnected systems. Scientists coined a term to describe how small events can reverberate through complex networks and systems to cause major, even catastrophic, effects – the butterfly effect, which posits that the flapping of a butterfly's wings in Brazil can create a Texas tornado.

Thanks to globalization, interdependent systems are everywhere. From food production to financial transfers, the electricity grid to the Internet, our critical infrastructures are connected to one another across the globe. And as passengers discovered that morning, this interdependence leaves us open to new threats, both unintentional and manmade.

One type of threat results from the unintended consequences of interdependence – let's call these malignant threats. They range from the bird on the wire to far more dire and far-reaching problems. Europeans, for example, are not trying to cause a health crisis in Africa by choosing to have fewer children. Yet graying European populations have impelled hospitals to recruit substantial numbers of healthcare workers from Africa, reducing the ability of that continent to deal with AIDS. The American taste for gas-guzzling SUVs may affect the ozone, raising world temperatures. Higher temperatures are already melting ice caps and causing sea levels to rise. We have nothing against coastal resorts or low-lying countries like Bangladesh, but we may end up flooding them anyway.

And that's only half of it. Interdependent networks are also increasingly vulnerable to planned attacks – call these malevolent threats. The Sept. 11 attack killed thousands of people and destroyed the World Trade Center's twin towers. But it also precipitated a network failure that cascaded across interdependent systems. By taking out a major subway and train hub, telephone towers and a significant portion of America's financial services, the attackers used interdependence to multiply the effects of the catastrophe and made response more difficult.

We may be tempted to treat malignant threats as long-term problems and malevolent threats as pressing – but the distinction is false. We don't get to choose between dealing with one or the other. Both can cause catastrophic damage. And one can exacerbate the other, by design or coincidence.

A few trees falling on a power line in Ohio caused the blackout that engulfed the East Coast last summer – a malignant threat coming to fruition. A malevolent computer hacker made it worse. On the day of the blackout, the Blaster worm infected and degraded equipment used to manage the power grid. The attack probably slowed utilities' ability to contain the cascading damage. The hacker didn't intend such harm.

Now imagine that terrorists had attacked during New York's blackout, when lights were off, streetlights were down and hospitals were dependent on emergency generators. A number of Al Qaeda's more senior members have engineering and other technical backgrounds. As they proved with 9/11, they understand well the malignant and malevolent vulnerabilities caused by our interdependent networks, and they know how to take advantage of them.

Analyzing both kinds of threats simultaneously can lead to better solutions than looking at them in isolation.

Take the electricity grid. Building resilience could help contain damage, whether caused by a bird, a tree or a terrorist. Encouraging distributed energy production – lots of small generating plants linked to portions of our critical infrastructure, rather than a few large plants – is one way to reduce spillover effects and keep terrorists from knocking out large sections of our grid. Getting utilities to stockpile spare parts, such as modular transformers that could replace, temporarily, those on huge (and vulnerable) power towers, would also build resilience. Keeping both kinds of threats in mind, we should disperse replacement equipment – lest a warehouse of stored transformers become a tempting terrorist target.

For real security, the US must build such resilience into a whole host of fundamental infrastructures. Because businesses own more than 85% of that infrastructure, this will require the creation of yet another network – between the public sector and the private sector. Already, for example, public and private hospitals are working with pharmacies and national security agencies to make possible the early identification of naturally occurring diseases (such as SARS) and bioterrorism.

We won't be able to prevent all attacks, but if business and government cooperate in analyzing the possibilities and devising protective measures, we may be able to make such threats considerably less catastrophic. And that would be a substantial gain over where we are now.

Retired Sergeant Major Raymond 'Ray' Benton read the article from the LA Times with interest. They were right, those authors, but they were a day late and a dollar short. Drafted in 1965 to serve in Vietnam, the old Sgt. had served 3 tours in country. He had been part of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). On 1 July 1965, the division was redesignated "Air Cavalry".

In 1965 the 1st Brigade relocated to Vietnam, but the rest of the Division did not arrive there until 13 December 1967. The Division returned to Fort Campbell 6 April 1972. In March 1974 it lost its airborne capability. Finally, on 4 October 1974, it was redesignated "Air Assault", a name it still carries. The "Screaming Eagles" Division was undergoing a change even now: the 101st Aviation Brigade was being reflagged as 1st Aviation Brigade, 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), and other Battalions of the current Brigade were to be formed under a new 2d Aviation Brigade.

13 December 1967. He remembered that day well. He also remembered each of his three tours. He managed to pick up 3 legitimate Purple Hearts, one each tour. The wounds hadn't been life threatening, though you couldn't have convinced him of it at the time. A Viet Cong bullet had grazed him on his first tour; shrapnel from an exploding NVA mortar round hit him on his second tour and it was even money that the third wound had been caused 'friendly fire'. He'd never know on the third wound, the FMJ bullet passed clean through, missing vital organs, but ending his service in Vietnam.

He had come out of 'Nam a buck Sergeant and had slowly moved up the ranks. His military career started in 'Nam and ended after Desert Storm. He had his rows of ribbons, the wings of a paratrooper, the scars and his memories.

Reclusive to an extent, Ray had dated several women but had never married, less baggage he thought. Instead, he had his hobbies, gun collecting, hunting and camping. At least he'd gotten through Desert Storm without a scratch and at 30 years, he'd retired on a $\frac{3}{4}$ pension. With it came the access to military commissaries, medical treatment when he needed it, and access to the Post Exchanges.

He hadn't accumulated a lot during his 30-years, a few changes of civilian clothes, his gun collection and camping gear, an old ford F-100 pickup, a TV, a HP computer and a refrigerator. Everything he had would easily fit in the used trailer he'd bought somewhere along the way.

When had that been? Was it in the late 1970's or early 1980's? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter. He'd rebuilt the trailer practically from the ground up after he'd rebuilt the Ford. However, Ray had spent his last few years as a supply sergeant and there were a few things that he had that he didn't count as his. They were 'borrowed' from the Army, permanently.

Things like the M16 rifle that no one could match the serial number to the records. It had fallen to him to determine the status of the weapon and Ray couldn't resist adding it to his collection because the Army had no record of the serial number and would never miss it.

Basically an honest man, Ray didn't let his honesty and basic decency get in the way of his appropriating some of the materials that came to him for final disposition. He'd retrieved M16 magazines from the scrap bin and purchased new springs and carefully hammered out the dents. They were perfectly serviceable after he'd worked them over

and the best part of it was they'd only cost him the price of the new spring and a little labor.

Ray had two rifles in his collection that were his pride and joy. The first was a Springfield Armory M1A, M-21, tactical rifle. The second was a Remington 700, M-24 SWS. He wouldn't have minded having a Barrett M82, but they were way too pricey.

The Army had made him switch to the M9 Beretta and he didn't like it. He carried the M1911A1 for too many years and the lightweight M9 just didn't feel right in his hand. And, the cartridge stunk. He'd taught himself to double and triple tap when he fired, to ensure he brought down the target. He had one of the weapons, another 'lost soldier' and lots of magazines for it, but he still preferred the .45.

When he'd mustered out of the Army, Ray had loaded everything he owned and borrowed onto his trailer and set out from Ft. Campbell for Colorado. He rented a cheap apartment in Colorado Springs and had spent two summers hiking the Rockies.

Ray had modest tastes and the military pension was more than enough to pay the rent and utilities. After spending the summers of '95 and '96 in Colorado, Ray moved north and west to the Jackson Hole Valley, Wyoming. He found a small acreage for sale, and it was far enough off the beaten path that the owner hadn't completely held him up. To this point, Ray hadn't touched his savings and in the market boom of the late 1990's his 401k was doing really well. Rather than disturb the principal, Ray took a loan out and bought the 40 acres.

The property had an old line-shack on it and Ray spent the summer of 1997 rehabbing the one-room cabin. He replaced the roof with cedar shingles and put in PV panels to recharge the battery bank he installed. He knew he'd have electricity during the summer, but he wasn't so sure about the winter; the snow might cover the panels. Just in case, he mounted the panels at a 60-degree angle; that should force the snow to slide off, even if it weren't the optimal angle.

There was a well with an old hand pump. It wasn't fancy, but it worked just fine and never froze up he later learned. He had an old woodstove with a reservoir to heat water. His sole concession to the outside world had been to put in a phone line. His lighting was the 12-volt RV variety and he had an inverter to provide power to his HP computer, the TV and his refrigerator.

Ray had to search for fallen timber that he could cut up on the spot and throw into the Ford. By the time the first snow fell in 1997, his world away from the world was cozy, well stocked with wood, had ample food laid up in the rafters and he only had to leave to use the outhouse and get water from the well.

It didn't take Ray too many trips to the outhouse in freezing weather to decide that he needed a septic system and an indoor toilet. An indoor toilet meant that he'd have to replace the hand pump on the well and put in an electric pump.

He went hunting during the late months of 1997 and had taken enough meat to get him through the winter. He hung the meat quarters in the rafters of his porch, thawing and butchering the meat one quarter at a time.

Ray spent most of the spring of 1998 putting in the water pump, the pipes and a septic system. He added another PV panel and some additional batteries to the battery bank, too. He didn't know how much electricity the pump would use for sure, but that little under-the-counter electric hot water heater probably used quite a bit.

Ray also took time to build a shed. It wasn't insulated, but it gave him a place to put the batteries and a used chest type deep freezer. That had been another reason to add more generating capacity and more batteries, the deep freezer. He'd squeezed in a shower stall, a stool and a kitchen sink in the cabin. He didn't need two sinks, who cared if he shaved and washed his hands at the kitchen sink?

His fall hunting trip had been good and his freezer was fairly full of meat. It wasn't all the way full, but he only had to provide for himself.

Ray had made it a custom to practice firing his rifles every Sunday afternoon, weather permitting. He only built a 600-yard range, and for all practical purposes, making a shot at 500-yards, even with the fancy rifles and the scopes, was the furthest he felt any degree of confidence in his shooting. Out to 300-yards, though, he was pretty damned good. At 400-yards, about 80% of his shots hit home and at 500-yards, his 66% average meant he could hit the vital area of a deer, but that was it.

The pension had begun to accumulate in his checking account and Ray paid quite a little extra on the 401k loan. If things kept up like this, he'd have it paid off by the year 2000. Having the storage shed also gave him someplace to store the extra dry goods that he'd bought in Jackson and at the Commissary.

Once he got snowed in, there was no running to the store. He occasionally made the trip to the Commissary at a military base and he would load up the pickup with supplies for 6 months at a time. Those things he couldn't get at the Commissary and he bought those in town.

After 30 years of shaving at least once a day, Ray also grew a beard. He still shaved his neck, but he didn't have to do that every day. To look at Ray, you wouldn't realize that he was 51-years old. He was fit and trim from all of his labor and he sort of looked like a modern day Mountain Man with his flannel shirts and beard.

Things were just the way Ray liked them; quiet with no one to bother him. He bought a 400-pound feeder steer and let it feed on the grass. On one of his trips to town, some kid had been outside the grocery store giving away puppies. Ray took a liking to a female that seemed to like him a lot and he finally had a companion. And one he didn't have to talk to.

He named her Promise, from what he could tell, she must be part pit bull and part Labrador, but who knew? Promise was fiercely loyal to him, but he didn't get many visitors. About twice a year, the Sheriff's Deputy stopped by just to make sure he was ok, but other than that, his neighbors didn't bother him and he didn't bother them. There probably weren't a dozen people who even knew who Ray Benton was.

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Stacy Marie Williams née Benton was a widow. Her husband of 15 years had been killed in Desert Storm, one of the few American casualties. Their only child, Ryan, was 13 years old. When her husband had died, Stacy had moved back to Jackson to live with her parents. She'd taken a job at the local market as a checker and had stayed on.

Eventually, Ryan and she had taken an apartment and moved out from her folks. Her mother was still there, so Stacy didn't have to worry about Ryan, she'd pick him up after work each night and often her mother had dinner ready. It helped to make ends meet.

Stacy wasn't poor, not by any stretch of the imagination, but neither was she rich. She had put away a little money every single payday since she'd taken the job. Everyone said you should put away 10% of every paycheck, but she was lucky if she could put away 5%. It was Ryan's college fund in case he decided not to go to a Military Academy. He husband had bought Ryan that right, with his life. But, that wasn't much comfort on a cold, lonely night. Stacy had dated a little, but hadn't found anyone she'd care to spend the rest of her life with.

Ryan was going through some sort of a stage, resisting authority. His grades in school, he was in the 8th grade, weren't bad, Ryan was smart enough. As he'd become a teenager, however, Ryan had gotten a little, well, independent. Maybe it was the loss of his father in 1992 and the lack of a male figure in his life that could provide him up-close and personal guidance.

Her father tried to fill in for her late husband, but she was an only child and her dad didn't have any experience raising a boy. He tried, he really did. He taught Ryan to shoot a rifle and shotgun, and he took him hunting and fishing every chance he got. Still, Ryan was missing something.

Ryan had been born in 1985 and he was just 7 years old when her husband had died. He'd taken his father's death hard, but with the move to Jackson and the passage of time, he'd seemed to adjust. Here he was a teenager, already. Six years had passed and Ryan had had his 13th birthday. Stacy knew that she ought to remarry and provide Ryan with a father, but she wasn't about to marry some man she couldn't love just for that reason alone. Ryan would just have to make do like she did.

Stacy wasn't a prude. She'd slept with a couple of the men she'd dated after a while when it had seemed that the relationship had possibilities. But both times, the men had

suddenly gotten very possessive, and she abhorred the possessiveness. The relationships had ended soon after.

There was probably some talk around town about her (they called her the Ice Queen) but she didn't care. If a man would suddenly turn possessive just because she'd shared her bed with him, how would he react to raising another man's son? She wasn't about to find out. It had been 3 years since she'd been out on a date.

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Ray made his semi-annual trip to Warren AFB near Cheyenne. He could have gone to any of a number of military bases, but going down to Warren gave him an excuse to drive on down to Denver where he had a retired buddy from the Air Force. Ray Benton and Scott Schumer weren't best friends, but they'd known each other since 'Nam. They'd met in the hospital while Ray was recovering from the shrapnel wound. Scott had been Air Force, Ray Army, but they'd met, of all places, on a Navy Hospital Ship. Scott had stayed in the Air Force and he, too had made it to E-9. Scott's last duty station had been Lowry AFB and he and his wife Susan had just stayed on in Denver after he retired.

The men had one thing in common, they both loved guns. Each was envious of the other. Scott was envious of Ray's M16 and Ray was envious of Scott's Barrett M82A1. Ray usually brought his M-21 and M-24 along and they'd get to a range and do some shooting. Scott was busy saving to buy some night optics for the Barrett. The rifle had set him back good and he had to put away just a little at a time to get that scope. By the time he had the money, they'd probably have 3rd generation night scopes.

They had their visit, went to the range, had an abbreviated night on the town and Ray had left the next day for Cheyenne. He couldn't tarry this trip; he had a new dog at home. Ray told Scott he'd named the dog Promise, having finally kept a promise to himself to get a dog.

Ray did his shopping at Warren AFB and headed back to Jackson. Promise was good for another day, she had a feeder that dispensed dog food into a trough and he'd left out plenty of water. He took a motel room in Riverton and set off bright and early the next morning. He hadn't bought anything at the Commissary that required refrigeration; he'd get that at the market in Jackson before he headed back out to his homestead.

He picked up butter and a dozen eggs (they didn't keep well), and the things the Commissary didn't carry. It was slow in the market at that time of the day and Ray pushed his cart to the checkout lane where the good-looking woman was working. He noticed that her nametag said Stacy. They struck up a bit of a conversation, not much really, just where do you live and the like. She seemed personable enough, Ray thought; some guy would be lucky to get her. He noticed that she wasn't wearing a wedding ring, but had a diamond on her right ring finger. Probably divorced.

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Stacy saw the man maneuver his cart to get into her checkout lane. She was flattered, a little, the guy must have thought she was attractive. Or, was it just because her lane was empty? Either way, she struck up a conversation with the man. He was apparently single; there was no ring grove on his left hand

His name was Ray and he said he had a small spread out in the middle of nowhere. He was very polite, even a little shy. He confirmed that he was single; his only living relative was his new dog, Promise. She'd seen him in the store a few times, but he'd always gone through a different checkout lane. She told him it was nice to meet him and moved on to wait on the next customer.

That night, she thought about Ray for a moment or two. He was a little older than she. The eyes gave it away. He was in pretty good shape for a man her age or older, though, so he must work hard. The thing that she found so intriguing about the man was his shyness. He was so polite he was almost apologetic. First impressions could be so deceiving, but there was something about the guy. Maybe it was the deference he'd shown her, talking to her as an equal, or even perhaps as if she were a superior. It was a shame he lived out in the boonies, she'd have gone out with him on a date if he'd asked.

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Ray was glad to see Promise. The darned dog had eaten her way through enough food to last a week in just the 4½ days he'd been gone. He'd have to come up with a better system for the next time he made an extended trip. That, or take her along. The dog sure was glad to see him; she damned near licked his beard off trying to wash his face and kiss him. In his hurry to get home and check on Promise, Ray had completely forgotten that he had intended to stop at the barbershop and get a haircut. At least, that's what he told himself was the reason for his being distracted.

He'd forgotten to stop by the auto parts store, too and buy some PRI-G for his gas tank. Come to think of it, he'd even forgotten to fill up his gas tank. And, he wanted to go hunting for deadfall to build up his wood supply for the winter. The fireplace kept the cabin warm enough and with the little water heater he sometimes just used the cast iron skillet in the fireplace rather than stoking up the wood stove. But, the fireplace used a lot of wood. Ray showered and fed Promise. He refilled the dog food feeder for another week and put out plenty of water.

He only intended to be in town for the day, how long did it take to get some PRI-G, a tank of gas and a haircut? When he'd made breakfast that morning, he'd discovered he had run out of pepper. He thought he had a can on the shelf in the shed, but he didn't. That meant another trip to the market. Maybe that good-looking woman he'd met the day before would be working. What was her name again? Stacy, that was it, Stacy.

Ray stopped at the auto parts store and picked up some PRI-G. Then, he went to the gas station and filled his tank and the 5-gallon gas cans for his chainsaw. He added the correct amount of PRI-G to each before he put in the gas.

Then, he set off to the barbershop. His hair had gotten pretty long. It had taken him a while to get used to not getting a haircut once a week after 30-years in the Army, but he generally got a regulation haircut those few times a year he made it to the barbershop. He had no idea what possessed him, but while he was at it, he got the barber to cut off that beard. Damned thing itched anyway and he had never really gotten used to it. Too many years in the Army, he guessed.

Ray got to the market and went inside to get the pepper. He noticed that Stacy was working. He got two cans of pepper, one for the cabin and one for the shelf. While he was at it, he walked up and down the aisles, looking for new things he hadn't tried before. By the time he'd walked the whole store, he had half a cart full of new things to try. He only bought one of each of the new things. Years of eating MREs had taught him to just buy one until he knew if he liked it or not. And, if he didn't like it, he only had to eat it once. Besides, there was Promise now and if experience were any guide, she'd eat anything. Ray maneuvered his cart into Stacy's lane to check out.

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Stacy noticed the man maneuvering his cart into her checkout lane. There was something very familiar about him, but she just couldn't place it. He was dressed a lot like the guy she'd struck up the conversation with the day before, but this guy had a GI haircut and was clean-shaven. He put the items from his cart onto the conveyor. She handed him the closed sign to put down after his food, it was time for her break. She had almost finished checking him out by the time he had his cart empty and moved to the register.

"Hi Stacy," the man said.

Stacy knew that voice. She looked closer, at his eyes. Darn, it was Ray with a shave and a haircut, she realized. Now she was flattered. The man only made it to the store about 4 times a year and here he was in her checkout lane two days in a row. She did notice that the only thing he had more than one of was pepper.

"Hi Ray," Stacy said, "I see you got yourself a haircut and a shave."

"I always get the haircut when I'm in town, but I was worried about my dog yesterday and completely forgot," Ray explained. "Then this morning I discovered I was out of pepper so I had to come to town."

"Ex-military or retired?" Stacy asked.

"Retired," Ray said, "Thirty years in the Army."

“My late husband was in the Army,” Stacy said, “Got killed in Desert Storm.”

“I’m sorry Stacy,” Ray said, “It’s always hard on the families. Maybe that’s why I never got married.”

“I’m going on break Ray,” Stacy said, “Would you care to join me for a cup of coffee?”

“Only if you’ll let me buy,” Ray smiled.

They put the bags of groceries in Ray’s cart and he took them to the Ford. He unloaded them inside of the truck and Stacy and Ray walked to the restaurant next to the grocery store. They got a booth and ordered coffee. While they were waiting for the waitress to bring the coffee, Ray spoke first.

“I don’t mean to be nosey Stacy,” Ray said gently, “But what happened to your husband?”

“He got shot,” Stacy said, “Never knew what hit him. They gave him the Army Distinguished Service Cross and the Purple Heart.”

“They don’t just hand out the DSC to anyone Stacy,” Ray said, “He must have been one heroic soldier.”

“That’s not much comfort you know,” Stacy said.

“You’ve never re-married?” Ray asked, “I noticed the diamond on your right ring finger but no wedding ring. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“No, I never did Ray,” Stacy said, “I dated some guys, but nothing came of it. Say, there’s a live band at the Lodge tonight, I don’t suppose you’d care to have dinner and a drink and a little dancing?”

“Gee, Stacy, I’m not much of a dancer,” Ray said, “But I’d sure like to take you out to dinner. Ok, but I’ll have to drive home and change.”

“It’s strictly casual, you know,” Stacy said.

“Ok where do I pick you up?” Ray asked, “And what time do you want to go?”

Stacy wrote her address on a napkin.

“Why don’t you come by around 7pm Ray?” Stacy said, “I’d like you to meet my son Ryan. By the way, what is your last name, you’ve never said?”

“Benton,” Ray said, “My name is Ray Benton.”

“Benton?” Stacy squealed, “I’ll be darned. My last name is Williams, but my maiden name was Benton.”

“All right Stacy,” Ray said, “I’ll see you at 7pm. I’d better get going if I’m going to get home, change and get back by then.”

“I’ve got to get back to work, too Ray,” Stacy said, “I’ll see you at 7.”

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On the way back to his acreage, Ray got to thinking. How long had it been since he’d been on a date? It was when he was still in the Army; hell, it was before Desert Storm. It must have been back in 1989, or was it 1988? It was a shame about Stacy’s husband, but people got killed in wars. Damned guy had to be a certified hero though, they didn’t hand out the DSC to just anyone. He wondered how old she was, it was so hard to gauge a woman’s age. She had to be in her late 30’s or early 40’s.

Ray got back to the cabin and took another shower to wash all the hair off after the haircut. He didn’t have a 5 o’clock shadow, the barber had given him a close shave, but he shaved anyway. He dressed in his finest outfit, a Navy Blue Blazer with tan slacks. She said it was casual, but he stuck a tie in his pocket, just in case. He dug out the spit shined shoes and gave them a lick with a wet, then a dry cloth. He couldn’t see much in the little mirror, but he guessed it would do. Anyway, he was ready to get to town and try and find Stacy’s place.

Mountain Man – Chapter 2 – Stacy and Ryan

Stacy told Ryan that he could have anything he wanted for supper. She had a dinner date and didn't really have time to cook. Ryan wanted a pizza, so she told him to go ahead and order it by phone while she cleaned up. She gave him \$20 and told him he could keep the change. All of a sudden that 4 topping pizza went to a one topping pizza, Ryan could use the money. It wasn't like he didn't get an allowance for doing chores but if he only got a medium one-topping pizza and didn't waste money tipping the delivery-man he'd have a whole \$10 left over.

Stacy was in the shower when the deliveryman brought the pizza. He gave Ryan a dirty look when Ryan didn't give the expected \$2 tip. He preferred to deal with the parents, they knew to give a tip, but this kid was young, maybe 12 or 13. He knew when the kid opened the door he wasn't going to get a tip. Stacy had finished her shower and by the time she was dressed, Ryan had finished his pizza. Ryan was watching TV when the doorbell rang.

"Ryan," Stacy said, "Would you get the door? It's probably Ray."

Ryan went to the door and opened it. An old guy, he must have been 60, was standing there. Guy looked like a soldier, too, he had the same type of haircut he remembered his father wearing.

"Can I help you?" Ryan asked.

"You must be Ryan," the man said, "My name is Ray and I'm here to pick up your mother for dinner. I'm pleased to meet you."

"Come in," Ryan said, "Mom, your date is here," he yelled out and returned to the TV. Ryan left Ray standing by the front door. Stacy came out of the bedroom and saw Ray standing there.

"Ryan, where are your manners?" she scolded. "I'm sorry Ray, kids!"

"No problem Stacy," Ray laughed, "I know about kids, I had to deal with them all of the time when I was in the Army. I was even a kid once myself eons ago."

"Ryan, I want you to come here and meet Ray," Stacy said.

"We met Mom," Ryan protested, "When I answered the door."

"Ryan," Stacy complained.

"Never mind Stacy," Ray said, "There's plenty of time for Ryan to get to know me."

"I sure hope so," Stacy thought. "My, he cleans up real nice."

“You’ll have to give me directions,” Ray said, “I don’t really know Jackson all that well. About the only places I get to are the service station, the auto parts store, the barber-shop and your grocery store.”

“Hang a left at the stoplight,” Stacy said, “Honest, too,” she thought.

Stacy directed Ray to the Lodge and they went inside for dinner. She ordered a gimlet and Ray ordered an iced tea.

“You don’t drink?” Stacy asked.

“I’ll have wine with dinner Stacy,” Ray said, “But we have a long evening ahead if you want to dance and I’ll have a drink later. Enjoy your gimlet; I won’t be far behind you.”

“Knows how to pace himself,” she thought.

“So what did you do in the Army Ray?” Stacy asked.

“I was in the 101st all of my 30 years, except for boot camp,” Ray said, “Jump qualified, but the 101st discontinued jumping in 1974. Did 3 tours in ‘Nam, and got my butt shot off all three tours. The last tour did me in and I ended up back at Ft. Campbell. I was an instructor for a while and then got into supply. That’s where I finished up my 30, in supply.”

“You don’t look any the worse for wear,” Stacy said. “Let’s give her our order and you can tell me about it.”

They placed their orders, Stacy went with the Lady’s cut Fillet and Ray ordered the 12 oz. Sirloin.

“There’s not much to tell really, Stacy,” Ray said, “Got winged by a Viet Cong my first tour, took some NVA shrapnel during my second tour and one to my gut the third tour. Nothing life threatening, though I thought so at the time.”

“What’s it like to be in combat?” Stacy asked.

“Tense,” Ray said, “It’s minutes and hours of boredom punctuated seconds and minutes of terror.”

“So, after you got out of the Army, what then?” Stacy asked.

“I kicked around in Colorado for a couple of years and then moved up here,” Ray explained. “Been here since the spring of 1997. Spent the first summer patching the roof and putting in some electricity. I have a wood stove and fireplace, so I had to scrounge to find enough wood for the winter.”

"This year, I put in indoor plumbing and built a shed. Put a small freezer in the shed and I keep my dry goods there. Even put a small hot water heater in and I have a shower. Did my fall hunting trip before I went to Denver to visit my friend Scott and I met you on the way back yesterday. Guess that about covers it. Tell me about you."

"I was born in 1955, and I have a birthday coming up soon, between Christmas and New Year's," Stacy said, getting that out of the way. "I married Ryan's father in 1977 and Ryan came along in 1979. I can't have any more children. I was your typical Army wife until he was killed in 1992. I moved back to Jackson and lived with my folks for a while. Then I got a job at the market and decided to stay. Not much to tell, really."

"So Ryan is what, 13?" Ray asked.

"Yes, and I don't know what's worse, the terrible twos or the tumultuous teens," Stacy replied. "Ryan is doing ok in school, but I'm an only child and my father is a poor substitute dad."

"I would have thought an attractive woman like you would have had them lined up at the door," Ray commented.

"I did, for a while," Stacy said, "But I got into a couple of relationships that didn't work out and after that, they quit coming around so much. I refuse to compromise my standards just to give Ryan a father."

"What went wrong?" Ray asked, "If I'm not being too nose-y."

"They got possessive after a while," Stacy said, "I'm not some piece of property a man can own, but they sure acted like they owned me."

"Those guys were damned fools Stacy," Ray said, "Not all men are like that."

"I know," Stacy said, "Ryan's father wasn't, but these guys seemed to act like I needed them. Ray, a girl can pretty much have any man she wants, if the truth were known, at least any single man she wants, so I don't know where they got off thinking I had to have them."

"Like I said Stacy," Ray repeated, "They were damned fools. I watched a lot of marriages break up over the years and 9 times out of 10 it was because one of the two parties to the marriage didn't give his or her partner the respect they deserved."

"Um, that smells good," Stacy said as the waitress delivered their order.

"Do you have any favorite wine?" Ray asked.

"Get what you think will go good with the meal," she said.

“Ok then I’m going to order a bottle of Merlot,” Ray commented. “Rather fancy the stuff myself.”

Ray ordered a split of the best Merlot the Lodge had in a split. It wasn’t the absolutely best Merlot they had, but he couldn’t see putting out \$50 for a bottle of wine that they might not even finish. The brand he ordered was very good and they ate their meal in relative silence, enjoying the food, the wine and the company.

One thing that had surprised Ray about Stacy was that she was so open. That indicated to him that she was sure of herself and knew what she wanted. He liked that in a woman. In a way, Stacy reminded him of the girl he’d left behind when he went to Vietnam. However, he didn’t think that Stacy would have dumped him for some war protestor the way Renee had.

After dinner, the two had coffee and at 9 pm the band started. It was an older group, more suited to Ray’s age group and they played a lot of 50’s and 60’s music. Stacy seemed to enjoy the 60’s music and some of the seventies music and they ended up spending a lot of time on the dance floor. Ray couldn’t remember when he’d danced so much. Maybe he never had, he reflected.

By the end of the evening it was rather apparent to each of them that they were attracted to the other. Ray had to admit that he really liked Stacy and there was no way he was going to spoil a good thing. Stacy thought about making a suggestion to Ray, but decided to let it pass, she didn’t want him to think that she was too forward. They both had the same thoughts and both came to the same conclusion. There was plenty of time for that later if they really hit it off.

Ray drove Stacy home and because it was so late, he took a room at the budget motel there in Jackson. Yeah budget, all right, \$55 a night between seasons. The next morning he got up and ate breakfast. It was a good thing he’d thought to throw in a change of clothes in case the evening ran late. He went over to the grocery store and picked up a can of something just to have an excuse to go through Stacy’s checkout lane.

“What time do you get off for lunch Stacy?” he asked.

“1:00,” she replied, “I’ll meet you out front.”

That gave Ray about 4 hours to kill, so he went shopping. Maybe he was being overly presumptive, but he needed a new bed, so instead of buying a new twin sized box springs and mattress, he bought a Queen sized bedroom set. He told them he’d pick it up on his way out of town around 2-2:30. He still had time to kill, so Ray went from store to store, killing time. He was standing out front when Stacy exited the store at 1 pm.

“Where would you like to go for lunch,” Ray asked.

“The restaurant has a good lunch menu,” Stacy said, “And we won’t have to waste time driving anywhere.”

They got the same booth as the day before and ordered lunch.

“I can’t tell you how much I enjoyed myself last night,” Ray said. “I honestly don’t think I’ve danced as much in my whole life.”

“You can just tell the difference in our ages,” Stacy said, “By the music we learned to dance to. Although, I must say, you’re a pretty good dancer for a child of the 60’s.”

“Hey there,” Ray laughed, “Don’t be making fun of the 60’s music. There was a lot of good music back in the 60’s.”

“I wasn’t,” Stacy said. “So tell me, if a person wanted to get to your acreage to visit you, how would they go about getting there?”

Ray took a napkin and carefully wrote out directions to his 40 acres. Stacy asked him if he did much shooting. He said sure, he had a 600-yard range he’d set up. She said that she might bring Ryan out to use the range if that were ok with him. Of course he said, anytime. He also mentioned that he made it a habit to practice every Sunday afternoon. Stacy went back to work and Ray picked up the new bedroom set and returned to the cabin.

◦

Promise was very excited to see Ray. He’d deserted her for 4½ days, had come home and had promptly deserted her for another night. What was going on with this guy? She sniffed at the large paper bags Ray dragged into the shed. It smelled like food to her. Then he shut the door on it. It wasn’t fair, she loved to eat.

Ray dismantled the old twin bed and relegated the box springs, mattress and frame to the shed. They weren’t much good, but they still had a little life left in them. He set up the new Queen sized bed frame and the box springs and mattress. Obviously the cabin had been never intended to hold so large a bed. He managed to get everything in, just. The old wardrobe he had to hang his clothes in looked pathetic beside the new furniture. Maybe he could go back to town tomorrow and find a new one.

◦

Stacy had really enjoyed her time with Ray. Ray was polite beyond anything she was used to. He was clearly considerate and though he might be a little introverted he was charming. She wanted to get to know him a little better and there was Ryan to consider. If Ray and Ryan could come to some sort of a mutual understanding, well...

“Ryan, how would you like to go shooting on Sunday afternoon?” Stacy asked.

“Aw Mom,” Ryan answered, “Grandpa is old and he doesn’t like to shoot anymore.”

“I was thinking of maybe going out to see Ray’s small farm,” Stacy said, “He told me he had a 600-yard range and that he shot every Sunday afternoon.”

“Really?” Ryan perked up, “What’s your new boyfriend shoot?”

“He’s not my boyfriend Ryan,” Stacy said, “At least not yet anyway. I don’t know what he shoots, but I don’t think he’d have a 600-yard range to shoot .22’s on, do you?”

“That’s a real range Mom,” Ryan said, “Maybe he has some big rifles. Ok, I’m game as long as you don’t do any of that mushy stuff.”

Yeah, right mushy stuff. Give the boy a couple of years and he’d be into the mushy stuff himself. The mere thought of it made Stacy feel old.

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Ray wanted to get as much wood put up, as he could before the weekend. So far the weather channel on the net wasn’t forecasting snow, but it was surely coming. He’d put up quite a bit before he’d gone to Denver to see Scott, but you could never have too much wood. If you didn’t use it this year, you’d just burn it up next year for certain. He already had 8 cords, but he wanted twice that much.

A heaping pickup load was just short of a cord. Those guys in the city tried to get you believe that a pickup load was a cord, but they lied. He got a pickup load Wednesday afternoon, 2 on Thursday, 2 on Friday and 2 on Saturday. Two more loads and he was set for winter. He still had to size the wood for the stove and fireplace, and split it, but first he wanted it piled near the cabin.

Ray took Sunday morning off and cleaned up the cabin. Maybe Stacy and Ryan would come today. He got some ground beef patties out of the freezer and set them to thaw. He also pulled out an 8-pak of buns. They could have hamburgers and he’d try his hand at making some French Fries, using potatoes from his garden. Maybe, if they did show up, Stacy could help him. He’d never gotten the hang of cutting the fries evenly from fresh potatoes.

He got out his two precision rifles and some match ammo. Both rifles carried the same model Leopold scope. He thought Ryan might like to try a handgun too, so he dug out the M9. It was a good gun for practice.

o

Stacy and Ryan left early. The directions to get to Ray’s had more turns than a mountain road; she got lost once, but when she got to the next intersection and realized there

was no left turn, she backtracked and re-read the directions. Oops, skipped a line. Darn this place was really out in the country, she thought. Stacy was willing to bet that they didn't run a school bus out here in the winter. Actually, they did, but you sometimes had to wait a day or two for the roads to be plowed out. The thing that she didn't realize was that Ray never plowed his driveway. In an emergency, he could use the snowmobile to get to the road and to a neighbor's farm.

The name on the mailbox said Benton. "This must be the place," she thought. There was a cabin; it looked like an old line-shack to her, and a shed. She saw a half grown dog wandering around outside of the cabin. Ray said he had a dog, what was that name? Promise; silly name for a dog. Stacy pulled in and as she approached the cabin, Ray stepped out and waived to her. She pulled up to the cabin and Ryan and she got out of the car.

"Have any trouble finding the place?" Ray asked.

"A little," Stacy said, "Skipped a line in the directions and took a wrong turn Ray, but we got here."

"Come on in, it's fairly brisk today," Ray suggested.

The cabin was small, but not tiny. She noticed the new bedroom furniture right away. That old wood stove must be 80 or 100 years old she thought. There was a table and 4 chairs, a small desk with a computer on it and even two overstuffed chairs in front of the fireplace. A fire was laid out in the fireplace ready for a match. Ray had obviously been busy cleaning the place this morning; there wasn't a speck of dust anywhere. That metal cabinet over there must be his gun case; it had a lock in the handle and an extra hasp and padlock.

"What's with the new furniture?" Stacy asked.

"My old twin bed was getting broken down and I need a new bed," Ray answered. "I didn't want to spend money twice, so I bought the Queen sized bed."

"Why would you want anything more than a twin bed?" she coyly asked. "You have plans?"

"I'm a survivalist," Ray answered, "It's sort of like being a Boy Scout. You prepare for any eventuality."

"And what eventuality would require a Queen sized bed?" Stacy pressed.

"Well you know," Ray said, on to her game, "I might meet someone someday that I'd like to spend the rest of my life with."

"Someday? Ouch," she thought, "I'd better change the subject."

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Ray got the M9, several magazines, the match ammo and asked Ryan to carry the two rifles. You could almost see Ryan's chest puff up when Ray asked him to carry those rifles. Ryan could tell from the adjustable stock of the M-21 that it was a match grade rifle or better. A regular rifle didn't have an adjustable stock, no sir. He carried the rifles like they were made of glass. Ray had a picnic table set up behind the shed and a spotting scope sat on the table.

"Look through the spotting scope Ryan," Ray said, "That target is at 300-yards."

"Gee Mr. Benton," Ryan said, "300-yards is a long way to shoot."

"Not with these guns and scopes Ryan," Ray said. "But if you'd rather, I have targets set up at 100-yards and 200-yards, too."

"I like to start at 100, yards, Mr. Benton," Ryan said. "That's as far as a football field is long and that's quite a ways."

"Sure Ryan," Ray said evenly, "Whatever you're comfortable with."

Ray took a few minutes and adjusted the stock to fit Ryan's frame. When he was satisfied that the rifle and the boy made a good fit, he handed Ryan a 5-round magazine of 7.62x51mm match cartridges for the M1A, M-21. He showed Ryan how to insert the magazine and how to hold the rifle.

There were sand bags on the table for Ryan to rest the rifle on or he could use the bipod. Ryan elected to go with the bipod and he carefully inserted the magazine into the rifle. The mechanism took a lot of his strength to cycle, but he chambered a round. Ryan took a deep breath and let it out. He took the second and let it out. He took the third and final breath and let it half out. He squeezed the trigger, just like his grandpa had taught him and the rifle went off, half scaring him.

Ray was watching through the spotting scope. "Damn, nice shot," he thought. "Try it again Ryan, do it exactly the same way," he said.

"Did I hit the target?" Ryan asked.

"You did just fine Ryan," Ray said motioning to Stacy to look through the spotting scope.

Ryan fired the four remaining shots, not bad for a first group with a new rifle at 100-yards. The boy had shot an 8"-9" group. With practice, he would be a dead shot. Only when he had fired the entire 5-shot group did Ray allow Ryan to look through the spotting scope.

“How big a group is that Mr. Benton?” Ryan asked looking up from the scope.

“Oh, 8” to 9” Ryan,” Ray said, “That’s outstanding shooting, really outstanding. With practice, you will be shooting groups half that size, maybe even better. Let’s try the other rifle.”

As good as the M-21 was, the M-24 was even better. It was well capable of shooting sub MOA groups. Ryan tried the rifle after Ray adjusted it to fit him. Not bad, he shot a 7” group with that rifle. They spent quite a while at the range. Ryan even got a chance to shoot the M9 at 50’. He didn’t do as well with the handgun but he was young and had smallish hands. He should grow into the gun just fine.

Around 3:00 Ray suggested they call it a day. He wanted to get supper out of the way in time for Stacy to have daylight for most of the drive back to town. Stacy did the fries in the cast iron kettle after Ray got a proper fire going. He cooked the hamburgers on his small charcoal grill. He hated to see them leave, but he sent her on her way just after 4:00.

◦

Stacy was positively bubbling inside. Ray had won Ryan over completely. He treated Ryan like a man, not a kid. He had marveled at the way she cut the potatoes, too. What was the big deal about cutting some French fries out of fresh potatoes? He was genuine in his praise, both of Ryan and of her, she could tell. It was in his eyes. The mouth might lie, but the eyes always told the truth. Stacy was one hell of a poker player, by the way. Next time, she planned to stay the night if he’d let her. He had that old bed he’d kept; they could put it up in the loft for Ryan. He probably wondered if she were a real red-head. He’d just have to wait to find out.

◦

“Damn,” Ray thought after they’d left, “I do believe I’m becoming smitten with that woman. I wonder if she’s a real redhead?”

It had been a while since Ray had given into thoughts of lust and lustful things. A man didn’t survive long out where he lived unless he used the head on top of his shoulders.

Tomorrow he would get two more pickup loads of wood. Nine loads would equal 8 cords. He would be set for the winter. Then all he had to do was cut it to length and split the kindling for the stove. He hoped the snow held off for another two weeks, after that, he didn’t care. Maybe he should get a blade for the front of the F-100 and use it to push his lane open. It would be a mighty long winter if he didn’t, what with his being smitten with Stacy and all.

The next day, Ray headed out with his chainsaw to get those last two loads of firewood. He had them back well before dark and spent the rest of the day cutting down a cord to

length and splitting kindling for his wood stove. On Tuesday, he was going to town to get that blade for the Ford. And, while he was at it, maybe he could take Stacy to lunch. It was strange how the mind worked.

For years Ray had avoided any kind of engagement with the opposite sex, except for the occasional casual sex. Now, his mind was flooded with thoughts of this beautiful redhead he'd met just a few days before. Gee, that was right; he'd met her on Tuesday of last week. Had they only known each other for less than a week? It truly seemed much longer than that.

On Tuesday, Ray dug out the Jackson phonebook and called around until he found a dealer who had a snow blade that would work on his Ford. He fed and watered Promise and grabbed his checkbook. He was on his way to Jackson. The dealer was over a mile from the market, but a little exercise was good for the heart. Ray wrote the check for the blade and left the pickup so they could mount it. They told him it would be ready after 4 pm. He got to the market about 9:30. Stacy smiled when she saw him.

He walked over to her and plainly asked, "Free for lunch?" She nodded and said "1 pm."

Ray had 3½ hours to kill so he went shopping again. His towels were old and ratty so he bought a half dozen each of bath towels, hand towels and washcloths. He left the bag at the courtesy counter and told them he'd be in before the store closed. He still had 2½ hours to kill, so he went shopping for a new parka.

He found a really nice layered parka with a Gortex outer shell. That used up another hour. Wasn't 1 pm ever going to come? It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't been this jittery since back in 1965 when he was aboard the C-130 waiting to make his first parachute jump. Man, he had to get a grip. He was almost afraid to go the restaurant and get a cup of coffee, look at how wired he was without caffeine.

o

The market wasn't all that busy on Tuesdays, especially in the morning. When you were busy, the time fairly flew. When you weren't, the second hand took forever to go around the clock face a single time. Fortunately for Stacy, hers was the only checkout lane open and the morning didn't completely drag. She could hardly wait for lunch and she wasn't even particularly hungry.

She'd brushed against Ray a couple of times on Sunday, quite innocently. The guy was as hard as steel. The muscles in his arms didn't bulge, but he must swing an axe a lot or something. She'd had to ask him to move the cast iron pot on the stove and he'd picked it up as if it were a light as a feather. Lunchtime finally came and Stacy grabbed her purse and was out the door in a flash.

Other things that she needed to do could at least wait until she got to the restaurant (potty). Ray was standing there a grin from ear-to-ear. It seemed that he was as glad to see her, as she was to see him. He got them a booth while she went to the john.

When she sat down, she started to say, "Ray..."

At the same moment, Ray started to say, "Stacy..."

They stopped, each waiting for the other to speak. When finally they could bear it no longer they both began to speak, again at the same time.

"You go first," Ray quickly said.

Mountain Man – Chapter 3 – Before the Storm

“Ray, I just wanted to tell you how much it meant to me the way you got along with Ryan,” Stacy said. “You charmed his socks off.”

“I’m glad to hear that Stacy, Ryan is a really good boy,” Ray said. “But to tell you the truth, I was hoping I’d charmed the socks off his mother.”

“Any time Ray, and you don’t have stop with the socks,” Stacy replied, blushing slightly.

Stacy’s slight blush made our hard as steel Mountain Man blush a bit himself. Well, that was out of the way. Sex was such a difficult subject for some people to talk about. They had lunch and Ray suggested that he’d really like it if Stacy and Ryan could come out again on Sunday afternoon.

Stacy, perhaps a bit boldly, suggested that Saturday afternoon would better. That was fine, Ray said, but he usually shot on Sundays. That was okay, she said, they could wait until Sunday to shoot. Ray almost choked on his vegetable hamburger when she’d said that.

“Well, then, I’ll see you on Saturday,” Ray finally managed to get out. “I’m having a snow blade put on the truck. I decided to keep my lane open from now on. I have to come back to town tomorrow, too. Are you free for lunch?”

“Same time, same place,” Stacy replied, smiling. “I’ve got to get back to work Ray, I’ll see you tomorrow, ok?”

“Sure thing Stacy,” Ray said laying money on the booth to cover the check, “See you at 1 pm tomorrow.”

Sitting there, Ray remembered he’d never gotten around to replacing the wardrobe. He figured he’d better measure and put in the largest one he could find, just in case. He only had a single snowmobile, too and it wouldn’t hurt to get 2 more, money wasn’t an issue, and he could try to buy used machines. He also had to move the bed from the shed to the loft. It wouldn’t do to have Ryan lying up there in the loft wide-awake.

He still had two hours to kill until the blade was done, so he went looking for used snowmobiles. He found 2 used machines after looking for a while and bought them on the spot. He asked the dealer to tune up the machines and fix or replace anything that was the slightest bit ‘iffy’. He’d pick them on the next afternoon.

Ray checked around and found wardrobes in several sizes. He knew just where to come the next day when he came back to town to meet Stacy for lunch. He figured he would have to pull his trailer because 2 snowmobiles and a wardrobe was more than his Ford would hold.

His feeder steer was about big enough to butcher, too. He wondered if there was room in the freezer to hold the whole steer. He would have to check. Ray gave up and got a small pad and a ballpoint pen at a convenience store and started to make a list. He wrote down steer, wardrobe, bed, snowmobiles, FIREWOOD, food, gas cans, gas, PRI-G, and well, the list went on.

Ray checked his watch. It was time to pick up the Ford. He also remembered he had to pick up the towels at the store. He got the pickup and stopped by the store for the towels. He bought 3 more of each, just in case.

◦

Stacy was beginning to think that Ray would never ask. True, they had only known each other for such a short time, but she'd known the other guys for a lot longer and it hadn't made any difference. She liked Ray, a lot. Now if he could just pass the sleep test, there was some real potential in this relationship.

"Sleep test," she thought, "That's a damn funny name for it." But in each of her previous relationships, once she'd 'slept' with the guy, he'd changed virtually overnight into a possessive, unbearable person. She didn't think that would happen with Ray, but there was only one-way to find out. Besides, she really liked the idea of having that hunk of a man getting up close and personal with her. And, there was only 8 years difference in their ages.

Ryan and Ray had really hit it off. Stacy couldn't remember when Ryan had gotten along so well with a man she'd gone out with. Maybe that had a little to do with why she'd stopped dating. And, an 8"-9" group at 100-yards wasn't terribly good shooting, either, but Ray had made Ryan feel like he was Davy Crocket.

Besides, they'd shot a lot and by the time they'd quit, Ryan was down to a 6" group with the military rifle and a 4" group with the bolt action. Ray seemed to have infinite patience and that's what it took with a 13 year old boy, infinite patience. Ryan had actually had a lot of nice things to say about Ray on the drive back to Jackson. At least he hadn't called Ray an old man anymore.

◦

Promise was really glad to see Ray when he arrived back from Jackson. Ray had only been gone a few hours, but if you went by Promise's behavior, he'd been gone a week. Ray put up the towels and started going down his list.

The steer might fit in the freezer and might not. If it didn't, he could leave part of the meat at the locker plant. He'd take the steer in to be butchered when he went to Jackson tomorrow.

He measured the wardrobe space. There would be just room enough to put in the large wardrobe he'd seen. The old wardrobe could go in the shed and hold the 'off-season' clothes. The firewood would just have to wait a day. And the food presented another problem. There was plenty of room in the small shed. Small was 12' by 20'; it was almost half the size of the cabin.

Ray had a simple supper and got on his HP to check the Weather Channel. Snow was forecast for next week. He'd have to get busy on that wood later in the week, but there was so much he wanted to get done.

He wondered if Stacy and Ryan had good parkas like the one he'd found for himself. He would just have to ask. Well, maybe he'd better wait, Stacy might not understand. For that matter, he realized, all of a sudden, in a few short days he'd gone from being a loner to thinking in terms of three people living there on the acreage. Whoa, slow down hoss!

Ray had a somewhat sleepless night. He'd tossed and turned. That wasn't like him one bit. He woke up the next morning as tired or perhaps more tired than he'd been when he gone to bed. Obviously, he needed to get busy and split that wood; physical exercise would take care of the restlessness.

He hooked up the trailer, loaded the steer and headed to Jackson. He dropped off the steer at the locker plant and headed for the auto parts store. He picked up 10 5-gallon gas cans and several bottles of PRI-G.

Then he went to the service station and filled his gas tank and the 10 empty cans, making sure to add the PRI-G to each can. The next stop was to pick up the wardrobe. They helped him load it on the pickup, but he wondered if he'd be able to get it off the truck and into the cabin by himself. Oh well, he'd worry about that later. It was time for lunch with Stacy!

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Ray was standing in front of the market when Stacy exited at 1pm.

"Same place for lunch?" he asked.

"Sure Ray," Stacy said, "At least he cared enough to ask," she thought.

"Stacy, I'm trying to get ready for winter," Ray began. "The Weather Channel says that snow is forecast for next week and I want to put in some extra food."

"I thought you got your food at the Commissary down in Cheyenne," Stacy said.

“Normally I do,” Ray replied, “But I don’t have a very diverse diet living by myself and if Ryan and you turn out to visit once in a while, I’d like to have food on hand that the two of you are used to eating. Anyway, could you do some shopping for me?”

“I suppose so Ray,” Stacy smiled. “What did you have in mind?”

“Are you free for lunch tomorrow?” Ray asked.

“With you?” Stacy said, “Anytime.”

“Ok, how about you or someone in the store pick out some food for me?” Ray asked. “Just get stuff you and Ryan would normally eat and any other things you might need, you know, personal stuff.”

Stacy thought about that one for a few minutes. Was Ray already failing the sleep test? She was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt because she wasn’t quite sure what he was thinking. She decided to confront him slightly to see if she could tell what he was thinking.

“How much food Ray? And why would you want to put in a lot of food for Ryan and me?” Stacy asked.

“I was thinking you should limit yourself to \$1,000, Stacy,” Ray said. “Staples have a tremendous shelf life, so it’s not like any of it will go to waste. Besides, I told you I was sort of a Survivalist and that’s like being a Boy Scout. You are always prepared.

“What would happen, for instance, if Ryan and you were visiting and an unexpected snowstorm blew in? You two might be stranded for days until they got the roads clear so you could back to town. However, if you don’t think it’s a good idea or the idea makes you uncomfortable, we can just forget it. It’s up to you.”

“Well, that was better,” she thought, “Made sense, too. Besides, he’d left the decision completely up to her, hadn’t he?” That wasn’t the possessiveness that worried her so.

“Ok Ray, you’re on,” Stacy said. “But \$1,000 is a lot of food.”

“I realize that Stacy and there won’t be any meat in that either,” Ray said. “I took my steer in to the Locker plant to have it butchered on the way in today. It was about the right weight and I didn’t want to have to winter it another year. Say, speaking of snow, do Ryan and you have really good parkas?”

“We have winter coats, Ray, But no parkas, why?”

“I wanted to get you and Ryan something nice for Christmas,” Ray said. “I got myself a really nice parka on sale yesterday. I know it’s strange my thinking of parkas for Ryan and you, but I’m not used to buying Christmas presents for anyone. Besides, if you

wanted parkas, I'd have to know your sizes." Clever Ray, did it take you all of the way to Jackson to think that one up?

"That makes sense," Stacy thought, "It must be tough on a bachelor to shop for a woman and a child."

"Ok, thanks for the thought Ray. Sure, we could use nice parkas," Stacy said, "Just be sure that you get me a woman's parka, sometimes they're cut a little different to give a little more room in certain areas. As for the food, I'll get some for you, but I don't know about \$1,000. That's a lot of staples."

"Remember, I have a small garden Stacy, so I have potatoes and onions," Ray said. "Just get whatever you think I'll need, ok? I leave it entirely up to you. Anyway, your lunchtime is almost over and I have to make one more stop before I go back to the farm. See you tomorrow at 1 pm?"

"I'll be there," Stacy smiled.

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Ray picked up the snowmobiles from the dealer. They didn't need much, but since he'd insisted, the dealer had made some minor adjustments and inspected them thoroughly. Ray picked up a case of oil, some filters and spare spark plugs; it never hurt to have spare parts on hand. They loaded the snowmobiles in the trailer and Ray headed west and northwest.

When he got home, he parked the two snowmobiles next to his and struggled mightily to get the new wardrobe into the cabin. He rearranged everything and put his clothes in the new wardrobe. It was mostly empty. Getting the old wardrobe to the shed was every bit as challenging as getting the new wardrobe into the cabin. He finally succeeded and went back to the cabin to get his summer clothes to take to the shed.

Ray still had about 3 hours of daylight left, so he started in cutting the next cord of firewood to length. He lost track of time and finally quit just as the last rays of sunlight vanished from the sky. He'd managed to cut a lot of the firewood to length. He would get up early the next morning and stack the logs that didn't need to be split before he left for town.

Ray ate a light supper, he wasn't used to eating a big lunch every day in a restaurant, and he checked the Weather Channel on the net. That snowstorm was coming on a little faster than he had expected. Although he had a TV, Ray almost never turned it on. The news was so depressing and a lot of the entertainment shows on TV weren't worth the effort it took to watch them. Give him a good book anytime.

o

The next morning, Ray got up early and stacked the wood. He'd made quite a dent in the pile, but he still had to split all of that kindling for the wood stove. He left the trailer attached, not knowing how much food Stacy would end up buying. He'd forgotten to mention paper products to her; he sure hoped she'd thought of it. He didn't use many paper towels; the cloth towels were easy to wash. But there was toilet tissue and Kleenex and napkins.

That was another thing he thought driving to town. Ray normally hand washed in a pail with a scrub board, rinsed in a second pail, wrung out the water and hung his clothes on a line to dry. Maybe he should look into a washing machine. Ray was way out of his element here; he didn't have enough power to run an automatic washer and dryer.

Ray was standing tall in front of the market when Stacy came out the door at 1pm. He'd gotten in town early enough to get the parkas for Christmas presents, but hadn't solved the laundry problem. They went to the restaurant and got a booth.

"Did you have a chance to get the food for me?" Ray asked.

"Yes Ray, I did," Stacy said, "But maybe I went a little overboard. There is over \$700 worth of food there. Sorry."

"Stacy, I told you that you could spend up to \$1,000," Ray replied, "Are you sure you didn't miss anything?"

"Ray, Ryan and I could live 6 months on the food I picked out," Stacy said. "But you said to load up, so load up I did."

"Good. Now, I have another problem Stacy," Ray said. "I've always hand washed my clothes with a pail and a scrub board. Frankly, that is getting old. I've been racking my brain trying to figure out how to come up with something better. Have any ideas?"

"You only have the electricity from those batteries, right?" Stacy asked.

"Right. So an automatic washer is pretty much out," Ray said, "Besides, I was thinking more like something like a gasoline powered wringer washer."

"Can you add more batteries to your battery bank?" Stacy asked.

"Yes, but there is a space limitation," Ray replied. "I have room for 6 more batteries, that's it."

"Well," Stacy said, "I have no idea where you could get a gasoline powered wringer Washer (Lehman's), but if you could get by with an electric powered wringer washer, I might have an answer for you."

"Tell me more," Ray visibly brightened.

“Mom’s neighbor, Mrs. Jenkins, has an antique shop,” Stacy explained. “She saved her old wringer washer and wash tubs when she got an automatic washer and dryer. I guess she figured that if they sat around long enough, they’d be worth something and she could sell them as antiques. You might check with her. Her store is down the street about 5 blocks. Other than that, I don’t have a single idea.”

After lunch, Ray and Stacy went back to the store. Stacy had done a pretty good job of picking out food in Ray’s opinion, but he added some more toilet tissue. It didn’t spoil, it could double for Kleenex and you never wanted to run out of toilet paper.

They loaded the pickup first and then put the paper products in the trailer. Ray told Stacy that he’d see her Saturday; he had to get his firewood ready for winter. It might be a good idea, he told her, if she brought extra clothes for Ryan and herself. If that snowstorm came in early, they might get snowed in for a day or two until the road was graded. She’d do that, she told him.

Ray looked up Mrs. Jenkins. Yes, she still had her wringer washer and rinse tubs, but she didn’t know that she was ready to sell them just yet. Ray asked her what it would take to persuade her to part with them. He explained that he was getting pretty tired of washing his clothes by hand. Mrs. Jenkins didn’t really want to sell the washer and tubs, so she set a price that no sane person would be willing to pay.

Imagine her surprise when Ray whipped out his checkbook and wrote her a check for her asking price. She was stuck, poor Mrs. Jenkins. Maybe she should have asked for more. No, the price she’d asked was already highway robbery, but if this guy wanted to spend the money, she’d take it.

Ray needed to make more stops. His little water heater would never cut it, so he picked up a 40-gallon propane water heater for the shed. He also got 5 25-gallon bottles of propane. Then, he got pipes and plumbing fittings to plumb in the hot water heater that he intended to put in the shed. He also picked up a propane space heater for the shed; it got cold out there in the winter.

There was something else he intended to get, but he couldn’t remember. He thought and thought. Then it came to him. The stool wasn’t private. He needed a curtain to hang around it to afford anyone using it some privacy. He went back to the store where he’d bought the towels and got a curtain for the stool and a curtain for the bed. He also got the curtain rods. He was almost out of town when he remembered the batteries. Dang, his memory was slipping. He got 6 more batteries and cables. My, he was going to be a busy boy.

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Ray had come through with flying colors as far as Stacy was concerned. His answers weren’t slick or rehearsed. Well, maybe the bit about the parkas was a stretch, but they

would make nice Christmas presents. He was getting awfully domestic all of a sudden. That was ok with her, if he passed the sleep test, Ray might just end up getting a whole lot more domestic than he was.

She wondered what Ryan, her first husband, would have thought of Ray. They were a lot alike, Ryan Sr. and Ray. Ray was older, but they had that same, self-confident air about them. Ryan had been about 2" taller than Ray, at 6', but other than their obvious different looks, they could almost be the same man. Whoa, wait a minute; was she just interested in Ray because he was so much like Ryan? No, because as much as they were alike, they were different.

Where were the warts? Everyone had warts, or defects in their character. So far she hadn't seen any. Well, that M9 did say US Government on it, but maybe he'd bought it surplus. Ray was gentle; perhaps genteel was a better word. But like soldiers everywhere, he must have that tough side somewhere. He'd been in 'Nam and the Gulf War and survived both.

From her 15 years with Ryan, Stacy knew that even the genteel had that side of them that permitted them to survive and sometimes even thrive in combat. As long as she only saw that side of him when the situation warranted, she could live with that.

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Ray got home and started to unload. He set the washer, rinse tubs and hot water heater in the shed. The propane tanks went outside the shed for the moment. He set the batteries, cables and plumbing fixtures inside of the shed. The food all went on the shelves. Darn, this shed was getting cramped.

He put the curtains and rods on his bed and played with Promise for a few minutes. She was going to be a medium sized dog; he could see that much for sure. Promise seemed to adjust to having Stacy and Ryan around ok. He would have thought with the Pit in her she'd have been more of a one person dog. Well, maybe the Lab countered that.

He got busy finishing cutting up the wood into the correct lengths. He could stack it and start splitting it tomorrow. Meanwhile, there was the hot water heater and the space heater to set up. He worked late, and only had to run the pipes from the shed to the well house to have the water heater hooked up. He'd put in a small house around the well to hold the water tank. It was one of those tanks with the bladder in it that maintained the water pressure and tripped the pump when the water ran low.

Ray didn't have any trouble sleeping that night, because he was tired. Tomorrow would be another full day, too. There was a water line to run, propane tanks to hookup, wood to split, curtains to hang. He was still thinking of all he had to get done when he dropped off to sleep.

He had been too tired to check the Weather Channel on the net. That winter snowstorm was now forecast to hit Sunday morning or perhaps as early as Saturday night. Ray might have been delighted if he had known, there could be worse things than being snowbound with that good looking redhead.

Ray was up bright and early the next morning. He got the water line in from the shed to the well house only to discover that he needed one more plumbing fitting. He went ahead and cut a small hole for the propane line to pass through the shed wall to the bottle. Maybe he'd better put up a lean to for the bottles. That was a second reason to go to town. He set the batteries in place and hooked up five of them. Somewhere along the line, he'd either miscounted the cables or the store had missed putting one in his bag. That was reason 3 to go to town.

Ray would love to see Stacy today, but there simply wasn't time. He had a quick trip in. The battery cable was in a bag with his name on it, he got the plumbing fitting, went by the lumberyard and filled his gas tank. He sure was using a lot of gas lately.

Back home, Ray finished connecting the waterline, hooked up the sixth battery, filled the trench for the waterline, and erected a hasty lean to. He still had plenty of daylight, so he got busy splitting the wood. That was the only problem with the wood stove; you had to split the wood down to kindling size. You sure could bake good homemade bread in that oven, though.

Most of the time, Ray just used cold water; he didn't like to run the little water heater under the counter. But, with those six new batteries, he had enough electricity to run everything now. Well, you couldn't run the TV when the washer was running, or else you had to turn off the computer, but there was enough to leave the hot water heater on all of the time now, if he could just remember.

After dark, Ray ate a hardy dinner and then took the time to hang the curtain rods. That was one more chore out of the way. That was good, because tomorrow was Saturday. He had everything done that he wanted to get done except for finishing the firewood. He had 12 of the 16 cords done and only 4 more left to split. He'd work on that tomorrow until Stacy and Ryan arrived and he would be that much closer to being ready for winter. Ray was just too tired to check the Weather Channel on the net.

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Stacy was really looking forward to going out to Ray's for the weekend. She had checked the Weather Channel on TV and it DID look like they might get snowed in; so much the better. It would give her more time to spend with Ray and being cooped up in a 28'x 32' cabin would tend to make all of them reveal their true selves to each other.

She looked in the mirror and dabbed on a little makeup to bring out the green of her eyes. She had taken time to pack several changes of clothes just in case that snowstorm did come in early like the Weather Channel was suggesting it might. She also

made sure that Ryan took his schoolbooks. It was still over 3 weeks to Christmas break and if they did get snowed in, he would need something to keep him busy.

Stacy filled her gas tank and she and Ryan headed out. Ryan was really looking forward to getting a chance to shoot again. Maybe Ray was right; maybe Ryan was a good shot. On the way to Ray's cabin, she thought about the aftermath of Ryan's death. Ryan had really deserved the CMH, in her opinion, but they gave out no CMH's during the Gulf War.

Her local Congressman had thought that unfair and had promised her that when Ryan was old enough, he would give him an appointment to the military academy of his choice. All Ryan Jr. had to do was keep up his grades so that he could qualify. The Congressman might not be in office by the time Ryan was old enough, so he put it in writing. She didn't know that any successor would honor the commitment, but there it was.

Stacy took all of the correct turns and made it to the cabin almost as fast as Ray usually did, but then, she didn't know that. When they pulled up, Ray was splitting firewood. It looked like he had most of the wood ready for winter. They got out of the car and Ray stopped splitting the wood.

"Hi Stacy. Hi Ryan," Ray greeted them. "Give me a minute to stack this firewood and I'll be right with you."

"Hi Mr. Benton," Ryan said, "Can I help?"

Stacy almost fell down, so great was the shock of Ryan offering to help.

"Sure Ryan," Ray said. "Ryan, calling me Mr. Benton is a little too formal for my liking. How about you call me Ray? Or, if you'd rather, call me Sarge?"

"Ok Sarge," Ryan said, as he pitched in to help stack the firewood.

Ray would have preferred Ray, but, by giving the boy a choice, he'd further ingratiated himself with Ryan. It wasn't like those punk kids in the Army who were just too damned lazy to say Sergeant and only managed to get the first half of the word out. This wasn't about maintaining discipline; this was about making friends. Ray knew damn good and well that any chance he had of getting to know Stacy any better lay with his ability to get along with Ryan. Besides, he really liked the kid.

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"Let me get a quick shower," Ray said, "And I show you the changes I've made this week."

"We'll wait out here while you shower," Stacy suggested.

“Nonsense,” Ray said, “Come on in. I’ve added some curtains.”

Sure enough, Ray had added a curtain around the stool and shower. The stool curtain was separate too, so both fixtures could be used at the same time with a little privacy. Ray got a change of clothes out of the bureau and the wardrobe and pulled the curtain to take his shower. He’d completely forgotten to kick on the hot water heater under the counter and it was a quick, cold shower. Maybe the effect Stacy was having on him made that a good idea anyway. After he’d toweled off and dressed, he pushed the curtain aside and turned on the hot water heater under the sink.

Ray had noticed that it was clouding over pretty good while he’d been out chopping wood. For the first time in several days, he brought the Weather Channel up on his computer. Damn, this didn’t look good. It could snow late tonight or early tomorrow. The wind was up too much to shoot too.

“I’m so sorry Ryan,” Ray said, “But the wind is up too much to shoot today. Would you be terribly disappointed if we put it off?”

“No Sarge,” Ryan said, “I kind of got that idea when I got out of the car. It’s cold outside.”

“Stacy,” Ray continued, “From the looks of the Weather Channel, we have a snowstorm coming in. Do you think you should head back to Jackson?”

“Not on your life Ray Benton,” Stacy said. “I checked the Weather Channel before we left. If we get snowed in, we get snowed in. Besides, I had Ryan bring his schoolbooks just in case that happened.”

“But what about school and your job?” Ray asked.

“If the snow is that bad, they may just call off school,” Stacy said. “And my job will be there when I get back. I told my boss that we were going out in the country to visit a friend. If there’s a snowstorm, he’ll know we got snowed in. Besides, you have a phone don’t you?”

“Yes, but if it’s a bad storm, the lines could go down,” Ray pointed out.

Mountain Man – Chapter 4 – Blizzard

“Que sera, sera,” Stacy commented.

Ray led Ryan and Stacy out to the shed. He showed her his full battery bank, the hot water heater, the wringer washer and rinse tubs and the shelves filled with food. How very romantic. Then again, it depended upon how one looked at it.

Obviously Ray had put a lot of thought into equipping his small homestead. The 40-gallon propane hot water heater could be fired up on washdays and would provide ample hot water for washing. The wringer washer and rinse tubs were old and old fashioned, but a wringer got the water out just as good or better than a spin cycle on a modern automatic washer. Stacy had used that very washer many times, helping out Mrs. Jenkins on washdays before Mrs. Jenkins had gotten her automatics. They were like old friends.

Ray had all of that food, too. Stacy noticed that the things she'd picked out weren't all that different from what he already had. The only difference, in many cases, was the brand of the item. Ray tended to buy the so-called house brands as opposed to the name brands. They were generally just as good as the name brands, but a few cents cheaper.

Sometimes, house brands were name brands that just missed the quality standards set by the manufacturer, like 0.1% too much salt or something. In other cases, the house brands were specifically manufactured for the store chain. Take green beans for example. What if the house brand was the name brand with a little too much salt? People frequently put salt, pepper and butter on green beans anyway, so what did it matter? They just put a little less salt on their beans.

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“What should I take out of the freezer for supper?” Ray asked. “I haven't picked up my steer from the Locker yet, but I have some beef steak, hamburger patties, a pork roast, and lots of venison.”

“Sarge, could I have hamburgers?” Ryan asked.

“Sure thing Ryan, how many?” Ray replied.

“Two,” was the reply.

“And you, Stacy,” Ray said, “What would you like?”

Stacy lied, Ryan was standing right there. “Steak would be ok with me.”

Ray took out two New York Strips and the hamburgers and they returned to the cabin. There were buns in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator. Darn, it could start snowing any minute.

Ray handed the beef to Stacy and grabbed an armload of wood for the stove. Stacy set the meat on the counter to thaw. Ray hauled in more firewood for the fireplace and added a log to the fire. Ray went back outside and hauled in some more firewood. His porch was stacked to the rafters with logs for the fireplace and kindling for the stove.

“Stacy, it looks like it’s going to snow like crazy,” Ray said. “Would you give me a hand and help select some food to bring to the cabin?”

Ryan was engrossed in a game on Ray’s computer and never even looked up. Stacy and Ray headed for the shed. The minute they got inside, Stacy took Ray in her arms and planted one on him that damned near blew the top of his head off. She had wanted to do that for several days now. Ray returned the favor, but they called it to a halt before things went too far. They managed to get some food selected and returned to the cabin. Ryan looked up as they entered.

“Mom,” Ryan asked, noticing the lipstick on Ray’s face, “Does this mean that Ray’s your boyfriend now?”

“I guess so Ryan,” Stacy said.

“Good,” Ryan said and returned to his game.

Ray didn’t know what to make of that exchange, but he was truly getting hooked on this woman and it had been less than 2 weeks.

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About the time they sat down to eat dinner, it began to snow. The wind picked up considerably, and before long, the snowstorm began to qualify as a blizzard. The wind was really howling.

Ray had served the steaks with baked potatoes and canned mushrooms and Stacy had made Ryan French fries. Ray had a case of soda in his refrigerator; he knew there was something there for Ryan because Stacy had picked out the soda. After dinner, he went out to the shed and lit the space heater. It wouldn’t do to have anything freeze. The space heater was connected to its own 25-gallon bottle of propane, but Ray had no idea how long that would last. He guessed he should have read the instructions.

When he got back to the house, Ray borrowed the computer from Ryan long enough to check the Weather Channel. Central Montana and western Wyoming were in a blizzard and the forecast didn’t look good. It might run for as long as a week.

Wind and snow make a blizzard. That's as basic as we can get. From there on, it's shades of white. Strong winds and steady snowfall make the big ones. But snow moves in strong winds even if it is not snowing, if there's enough snow on the ground and it's not too old and icy. These are ground blizzards, and sometimes they happen even with clear skies above.

A blizzard is a North American name for a violent, bitterly cold wind accompanied by blowing snow whipped up from the ground. Freezing temperatures, high wind speeds, low visibility, and drifting snow create hazardous conditions. Snowstorms occur when two different fronts collide. In the winter, when a warm front moves in and meets a cold front, heavy nimbostratus clouds develop and heavy snowfall occurs.

The air holds tiny water droplets. When these droplets become too large for the air to support, they fall to the Earth as rain. Snow forms when a cloud's temperature is between 10 degrees Fahrenheit and 4 degrees Fahrenheit. There are ice crystals in clouds. The tiny droplets of water freeze onto crystals, building them up. Then, they fall to the Earth as snow.

When it is 39 degrees Fahrenheit on the Earth's surface, the snow will land before it melts. In order for snow to build up on the ground, it has to be much colder. According to the US National Weather Service, winds of 35 mph or more and visibility of a quarter mile or less are conditions that, if they endure for three hours, define a blizzard.

Blizzards can cause serious damage. The weight of snow can make buildings collapse. Crops freeze, and livestock can be killed.

Ray figured the wind must be blowing closer to 45 miles an hour and he could barely see the shed from the cabin or vice versa. It was a good thing he'd taken that steer in to the Locker plant, too. It might never have survived this storm.

Promise was curled up in a ball at Stacy's feet. Obviously Promise had accepted Stacy and Ryan. He noticed that Stacy was absently scratching Promise's head earlier. He guessed that the two of them had passed the Promise test. He bundled up and got some more wood from the front porch.

It looked like he'd have to give Stacy and Ryan their parkas early and come up with another Christmas present. He had some ideas along that line already. Stacy still had to pass the Ray test. He had no idea that Stacy had her own version of the Ray test called the sleep test.

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Ryan had given up early the night before. Ray served Stacy another glass of the Merlot and they retired for the night. They eventually even got some sleep. Stacy had been a wonderful lover. She had anticipated his every desire and had passed the Ray test with

flying colors. Ray had passed the sleep part of the sleep test with flying colors, too. He had anticipated Stacy's every desire and he was so gentle and considerate.

Bottom line was that the two of them were compatible in bed. Very compatible! It had been a long time for both of them and they hadn't realized how hungry they were for attention from another adult human being. Now, Ray just had to pass the second half of the sleep test. That was the real test anyway. How would he behave the morning after?

Ray was up early and had a fire going in the fireplace and in the woodstove. He put on a pot of coffee and had bacon and eggs in the refrigerator. He'd even taken out a can of frozen OJ and made a pitcher of juice. He was quiet, letting Ryan and Stacy sleep.

He tried to bring up the Weather Channel on the net, but the phone lines were down. During the night, the wind had approached speeds of 60 mph and gusted even higher. The howling had been what had finally lulled him to sleep. He'd let Promise out to take care of business. She hadn't been outside for a moment longer than it took.

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Stacy had explained that there had been complications with Ryan's birth and that the doctor's had found it necessary to perform a hysterectomy to save her life. It was most unusual in the mid-1980's to have that happen, but it had happened, nonetheless. That explained a question that had come up when Ray had put away Stacy's purchases from the grocery store

She had told him she couldn't have any children and when she wanted him to know more about it, she had told him more. Ray wasn't one to pry, not really. He wanted to know a little about Ryan Sr. after he'd been told about the DSC, but it was more out of respect for the man than anything else. If there was one thing that Ray knew, it was that you couldn't compete with a ghost. Stacy woke up feeling like a million bucks. She slipped into a robe and joined Ray at the table.

"Good morning. Coffee?" Ray asked. He leaned across and gave her a gentle kiss on the forehead. He uttered a single word, "Wow!"

"Coffee would be fine Ray," Stacy said. "I'm starved, what do you have for breakfast?"

"Orange juice, bacon, eggs and toast," Ray said, "Want me to start breakfast?"

"Sure," Stacy said.

"What about Ryan?" Ray asked.

"The smell of the food will wake him up," Stacy replied.

Ray poured Stacy a glass of orange juice and got the bacon going. He drained it on a paper towel (I said he didn't use many, not that he didn't use them at all). When the bacon was crisp, Ray asked Stacy how she liked her eggs.

"Can you handle over medium?" she asked.

"Over medium or scrambled," Ray said, "Is all I can handle. Well, I guess I could break the yolks."

Ray toasted the bread over the fire after he removed a burner plate. He had the eggs and toast done about the same time. He served Stacy and noticed Ryan climbing down the ladder from the loft. Stacy noticed too.

"Scrambled for Ryan," she said.

Ray obliged. He had gotten a ½ gallon of milk in town the last trip in and it was fresh, so he asked Ryan if he wanted milk or coffee.

"Ryan will take milk," Stacy answered for him. That was good to know and that explained all of instant milk in the shed. He fixed himself eggs over medium and some toast and joined them.

Ryan was looking strangely at Stacy. He wasn't old enough to understand what he was seeing, but Stacy positively glowed. He knew there was something different about his mother; he guessed it was Ray. Whatever it was, he liked what he saw. His Mom hadn't smiled in a long time.

He then turned his attention to Ray. Ray had a softness about him that Ryan hadn't noticed before. Ryan finally put 2 and 2 together and decided that they been fooling around the night before. Oh well, that wasn't any of his business he decided, that was grownup stuff. Besides, Ray always talked about his father with a great deal of respect. Yeah, Mom could keep this one if she wanted to.

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Out of the corner of his eye, Ray had been watching Ryan. Ryan had apparently been mulling something over in his mind. Ray caught the briefest nod and the hint of a smile. Maybe he had passed the Ryan test, but what about the Stacy test? Stacy couldn't have been clearer about what had driven her away from the other men she'd had relationships with. For Ray, that was no challenge.

Stacy was the same woman this morning that she'd been the day before. He had no intention of treating her any different as a person. He sure as hell didn't own her. He was grateful she thought enough of him to share herself with him. She was his equal in every respect as a human being and more than his equal in the bedroom. He might be in

pretty good physical condition, but he'd need to start getting more exercise if he was going to keep up with her.

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As far as Stacy was concerned, Ray was doing fine on the sleep test. If he were still acting the same way in two more weeks, he would pass with flying colors. The other guys hadn't taken more than a day or two to start acting possessive. She had shared herself with them, not given herself to them as a possession. But, that was the way they acted, like they owned her. Let's just get through the weekend and then we'll see; maybe even sooner. She needed a shower.

"Ray, I need a shower," Stacy said.

"Stacy, I bought a whole lot of new towels and washcloths," Ray said. "They are on the shelf above the stool. I put one of your bars of soap there, too."

Hmm, there they were, all right, brand new towels and washcloths. Well, at least the guy knew better than to expect company to use those old ratty things she'd noticed the last time she was here. And the curtains were a positive stroke of genius. She'd wondered how he was going to manage privacy in a one-room cabin.

She'd let his failure to wash the sizing out of the towels go. After all, he'd just gotten the washing machine. While Stacy was in the shower, Ray asked Ryan if he wanted to play a game on the computer. Ryan decided that he wanted to do his homework, so Ray went ahead and washed the dishes, careful to use hot water from the stove reservoir rather than from the hot water heater.

Stacy got out of the shower and toweled off. She slipped back into her robe and went to the bed area to get dressed. Ray was busy washing dishes and never even looked up. It suddenly made Stacy realize just how much she valued her privacy. The man was a real dear. The other men she'd spent time with couldn't pass up an opportunity to leer and mentally undress her.

Ray had heard Stacy get out of the shower and dry off. The next move was hers; he wasn't going to invade her privacy. When she headed to the bedroom to dress, he concentrated on his dishwashing. He knew what she looked like; he didn't have to stare at her to visualize that beautiful body.

The wind continued to howl just as badly as it had the night before. Obviously they weren't going outside right away. Ray figured that it would be interesting to see if they could amuse themselves during the storm without getting in each other's face. But first, he wanted to give them the parkas. Those winter coats they'd worn out here yesterday wouldn't cut it in a storm like this, even after the wind died down. When Stacy presented herself dressed in slacks and a sweater, Ray went to the Wardrobe and pulled out the parkas.

“Here you two, try these on,” Ray said handing them the parkas.

“I thought those were supposed to be Christmas presents,” Stacy said.

“Well, I guess that Christmas just came a little early this year,” Ray gracefully recovered.

“Thought so,” Stacy thought. The coat fit her like it had been made especially for her. And, mittens, too! Ryan tried his parka on and it was just the right size. Stacy had taken a chance and given Ray one size larger than Ryan usually wore. He was a growing boy and she had wondered how she was going to buy him a new winter coat and put money away for his college.

She tried on the mittens and noticed that they had a cutout so you could fire a gun or whatever. She didn’t know that she’d be shooting a gun anytime soon, but the man obviously planned ahead. She wondered what other plans he had.

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“Neat,” Ryan said when he’d tried on the mittens. “I can shoot a gun wearing these.”

“It is a lot better to wear a lightweight glove inside of the mittens,” Ray said, “If you’re going to be shooting; but mittens are really necessary in a climate like this. Otherwise, wearing gloves alone could expose you to the possibility of frostbite.”

Ray had decided what he wanted to get Ryan for Christmas. He also had a pretty good idea what he wanted to get Stacy for Christmas, but he was torn on the subject. She still wore Ryan’s diamond on her right hand, so maybe a diamond wasn’t such a good idea. But, he definitely had some ideas on a Christmas present for Stacy.

Maybe she would like a cabin out in the middle of nowhere. Ray hadn’t felt this way about a woman since he’d left Renee behind to go to Vietnam. Look at how that had turned out, he warned himself. Still, Renee and he had both been immature and as he reflected back on it, he was glad she had taken off on him. Better to have it happen before they got married than after.

Ray didn’t know how lucky he had been. Renee had gone through three husbands and was working on the fourth. It was anybody’s guess how long the new guy would last, but his friends didn’t give it long; only until she spent his money.

Anyway, Ray had seen so many marriages fail. The fact that Stacy and Ryan had managed to make it through 15 years told him a lot about her character. It wasn’t easy being an Army wife. The low pay, the uncertainty and a whole bunch of soldiers making passes at anything in a skirt had ruined more than one Army marriage. He’d seen it all and had been grateful he was single. But, he was out of the Army now and maybe being a

loner wasn't such a good deal. Promise was proving to be a good companion, but last night had reminded him that there was more to life than having a dog buddy.

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Stacy noticed that Ray had a small bookshelf above his computer desk with several good titles on it. There were a couple of books she had wanted to read, but had never had time. She wondered if Ray would feel left out if she got a book. There was only one way to find out.

"Ray, do you mind if I read one of your books?" she asked.

"Help yourself Stacy, that's what they're there for," Ray replied.

Stacy took down the copy of James Michener's *Hawaii*. "What is this book about?" Stacy asked.

◦

Ray had no intention of spoiling the book for Stacy. He gave her the jacket cover description of the book.

The book covers Hawaiian development from 1854, when people from Bora Bora migrated there, through 1954 and the emerging of this American territory and soon-to-be state. Though the book is a mixture of fiction and fact, reading it can be an excellent way to get an understanding of the many foreign and competing forces that shaped this beautiful place.

Polynesian founders, New England missionaries, Chinese business people, and Japanese immigrants are all represented – as are the dynasties they spawn in Hawaii. We are shown the native Hawaiians' worship of multiple deities and the fire goddess Pele, their abandonment of their religion at the coercion of Christian missionaries Abner Hale and John Whipple, Chinese immigrants Char Nyuk Tsin and Kee Mun Ki, and Japanese laborers Kamejiro Sakagawa and his friend Oshii, who is a fanatical supporter of the Japanese emperor.

Perhaps more than in any other state, Hawaiian people are a blend of their ancestors. Inter-marriage between natives and newcomers has closely knit the various ethnic groups and the island's commerce. Hawaii is the American state closest to the contemporary powerhouses of Asia: Japan, China, and Southeast Asia.

"Funny," Stacy said, "I got that much from reading the jacket."

"Stacy, I don't want to spoil the book for you," Ray replied, "Read it or not, that's up to you. But I won't spoil the story by giving you my version of what I read."

“Do you mind if I read?” Stacy asked.

“Not at all,” Ray said, “I have a new book I want to read, too. We can read together.”

As a matter of fact, Ray had several new paperbacks he wanted to read. William W. Johnstone had hooked him on the *Out of the Ashes* series. Not that they were particularly realistic, but they were entertaining, nonetheless. Someone called them ‘potato chip books’ and he had to agree.

It was nice that Stacy liked to read. He only got the one TV channel, when the weather permitted. He also had the net, again, when the weather permitted. That was why he went online to get the Weather Channel; he didn’t get it on his TV. There was no cable way out here in the sticks, and even if there were, he didn’t intend to pay for something he could get for free.

“This is nice,” Stacy thought, “He isn’t a bit threatened that I want to read a book instead of holding hands.”

◦

Ryan had gone through several of the games on Ray’s computer. The guy had a better collection of games than he did, if you could believe that. Ryan did notice, however, that some of the games had never been played. Ray had downloaded and installed them, but had never played them.

He did notice in the statistics on FreeCell that Ray had played over 20,000 games. Solitaire didn’t record statistics, but Ryan would bet he’d played that plenty of times. Sarge seemed to give everyone their space. Ryan wished the wind would die down, he wanted to get outside.

◦

Promise finally couldn’t wait any longer and she went to the door and yelped to be let out. She did not like the blowing snow one bit and made short work of her trip. At least she had a little area to use without having to wade the snow. She didn’t comprehend that Ray had stacked the wood to keep the front of his east-facing cabin free of snow. All she knew was that she wanted back in the warm cabin. She barked and Ray opened the door for her. She immediately went back to Stacy’s chair and curled up. Promise didn’t understand a lot of human things, but she knew these new people belonged here with her friend.

◦

Ray had been listening to the wind off and on. It hadn’t been howling quite as badly and when he’d let Promise out, he’d noticed that it was only blowing about 30mph, maybe a little less. That meant that the blizzard was now just a fierce winter snowstorm.

It had snowed steadily and a lot of snow had accumulated. But, with the drifting, it was hard to tell how much snow they'd really gotten. The snowfall had slacked off too. It looked like it might end by nightfall. The cabin was comfortable with the fireplace going and the kitchen stove. From time to time Ray added another piece of kindling to the stove to keep some coals going. That also served to keep the pot of coffee hot.

Ray had decided that he was going to get Ryan a Remington 700 ADL rifle for Christmas. He knew that the rifle came with either a wood stock or a synthetic stock and they even had a youth model. As pretty as the wood stock was, the synthetic stock was far more practical.

And, Ryan was a growing boy and would soon grow into the standard model so he figured he would skip the youth model. Having a grownup's rifle would make Ryan feel more grownup. Although the rifle came in several calibers, Ray only had 7.62x51mm's. The 30-06 might be a little too much for the boy and make him gun shy. Having a gun the same caliber as his made more sense anyway. It would mean not having to buy different calibers of ammo.

The cabin had served Ray well. Even when he'd gotten Promise, there was plenty of room. But, the shower and the stool ate up a little of the space and the queen sized bed and bedroom furniture a lot more. It was now a little cramped. With Stacy and Ryan here, he'd realized how cramped. He didn't mind the closeness, but if Stacy and he did have a future, he'd have to do something about getting more space. Maybe he should consider a new cabin closer to the road. But, there was no sense in crossing that bridge until he came to it.

o

"What would you folks like for lunch?" Ray asked.

Stacy looked up from her book. "Is it that time already?" she asked. "Let me get something prepared. Ryan, are sandwiches and soup ok?"

Ryan barely looked up from his game. "Whatever," he mumbled.

Stacy looked at Ray who just nodded. She got busy slicing the bread, heating soup and making the sandwiches. Ray, she noticed, got out several pieces of paper, a ruler and a pencil and sat down at the table. While she finished preparing lunch, Ray began to draw something on the paper.

She went over to look, but he turned the paper over before she could see. Secrets, huh? Well, she supposed he had the right to his privacy. She had gotten engrossed in the book and he hadn't disturbed her once. That was nice. She set the soup and sandwiches on the table and told Ryan to eat his lunch. She'd noticed that the wind was dy-

ing down too, darn it. The windows were completely frosted over and she couldn't see out. After lunch, she'd have to peek out the front door.

"I didn't know you were an artist," Stacy said to Ray.

"I'm not Stacy," Ray replied. "Oh, you mean the drawings. I was noticing the cabin was a little cozier than I had ever thought it could be. I was just roughing out some sketches for a new cabin."

"I think this cabin is perfectly charming," Stacy said. "But I see what you mean, it's only one room divided by some curtains. What were you coming up with?"

"Nothing fancy, just a larger cabin with bedrooms and a separate bath," Ray said. "I'd probably keep the kitchen and living room all as one big space to make it easier to heat."

"Bedrooms, not bedroom," Stacy thought. "I wonder what he is thinking? No I don't, the man is clearly smitten. Well, Ray Benton, me too."

Ryan hurried through his soup, sandwich and milk and returned to the computer. His mother had called him to lunch just as he was about to win that game. He hoped she hadn't broken his streak. The wind was dying down he noticed, maybe they could get out tomorrow and shoot. He could play computer games at home and Ray didn't get but one channel, he said, on the TV.

o

Ray knew that as soon as the phone line was working again that it meant that the roads were plowed. The phone company was out after every big storm checking and repairing the lines as soon as the roads were passable. He checked the phone but there was no dial tone yet.

It was still early; the storm really wasn't even over. That didn't mean that they weren't out grading the snow off the roads, but he was far enough out that it usually took a couple of days for them to get to his area and another day for the phone company to restore service. As soon as the wind stopped, he intended to get out and try out that new blade on his pickup. Then, if Stacy stayed, it would be because she chose to, not because she was stuck.

Mountain Man – Chapter 5 – Digging Out

Over the course of the afternoon, the wind abated. Stacy was so engrossed in that book they'd hardly had a chance to visit. Ray had to admit that he didn't know how to read the situation. Was Stacy just feeling so at home that she was doing her thing or was she trying to avoid him?

Ray put on his parka and went outside. He shoved a path from the house to the shed. Where the snow wasn't drifted, he could tell that they'd gotten about 18", pretty heavy for a first snowfall. The Tetons were beautiful in their blanket of snow. Of course from where his cabin was, you didn't get the tourist view of the mountains. Ray had a yearning for fried chicken, so he took out a cut-up chicken from the freezer. It was time to see how good of a cook Stacy was.

"I brought in a chicken from the freezer," Ray said, "Is fried chicken ok for supper?"

"My specialty," Stacy replied looking up from her book. Ryan ignored him.

Ray set the chicken on the counter to thaw. As warm as the cabin was, it would be thawed in plenty of time for dinner. Fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy and green beans was Ray's favorite meal. Pan-fried round steak, mashed potatoes and gravy and green beans were his second favorite. Ray liked other vegetables, but he was especially fond of the canned green beans. They were so, well, dependable.

o

The chicken finally thawed and Stacy got up and started to prepare supper. It really smelled good to Ray. He'd read some more and then had gone back to his floor plans. He'd decided on two bedrooms separated by a bathroom. The new cabin would still face east and the bedrooms and bath could be on the south end of the cabin.

They didn't have to be huge bedrooms, just large enough for the furniture. Closets would be nice, but he had the wardrobes and if he skipped closets, he wouldn't have so many corners to build. Ray was not particularly an accomplished carpenter, but he figured he could build the cabin himself. He'd have to hire someone to put in a basement; the foundation needed to be deep and the basement provided needed storage. It was better than tramping to a shed to wash clothes or get something out of the freezer or off the shelf.

"That really smells good Stacy," Ray remarked.

"I told you fried chicken was my specialty," Stacy said. "Why don't you clear those floor plans off the table and set it Ray?"

Ray put the floor plans on top of the books above the computer so as not to disturb Ryan. Ryan was deeply engrossed in one of those games Ray had down loaded but

never played. It looked like fun. Ray got plates and silverware and set the table. He finished up just as Stacy was setting the last dish on the table. Um, fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy and green beans, his favorite. Stacy managed to pry Ryan away from the computer long enough to eat dinner. Ryan was particularly fond of his mother's fried chicken, too but he'd have rather had corn than green beans. Oh well.

"Stacy, this chicken tastes better than it smells," Ray observed. "You just happened to make my favorite meal."

"I sort of figured you liked green beans," Stacy laughed, "Six cases of green beans and only one case of corn on the shelf said a lot about what you like."

"Oh, yuck," Ryan thought.

"Hey, there are other vegetables on the shelves," Ray protested, "But I am partial to green beans. They're really hard to mess up. Dump the can in a pan, add heat, pepper, salt and butter and they're ready to eat."

"You've been a bachelor too long Ray Benton," Stacy thought.

Not having the chance to get outside and exercise left Ryan with extra energy to burn. Consequently, he stayed up longer than usual this Sunday evening. Ray had helped Stacy with the supper dishes, washing while she dried and put the dishes away. He was used to having to wash and dry his own dishes so it was nice to have someone to help and to visit with while he got that chore out of the way.

Promise had made short work of the chicken bones. Some people were afraid to feed chicken bones to dogs for some reason, but Ray could never see why. The way she wolfed them down, you have thought she hadn't eaten in a week.

After the dishes were done, Ray asked and learned that Stacy played cribbage. She was good, too. Remind him to never play poker with her. There were still two glasses of Merlot left in the bottle and late in the evening Ray poured them a glass. Either Ryan had finally gotten tired or he took the wine as a hint. Either way, he went off to bed, finally. Stacy and Ray played some more cribbage waiting to make sure Ryan was asleep. The total newness of each other had worn off the tiniest bit and they managed to get a little more sleep the second night; not much more, but a little more.

◦

Ray was up early as usual and had the coffee made and had let Promise out by the time Stacy got up.

"What time is it?" Stacy asked.

"7am," Ray replied, "Coffee?"

“Sure, it smells good,” Stacy said, “What’s for breakfast today?”

“Pancakes ok?” Ray asked.

“Fine with me,” Stacy said, “And Ryan loves pancakes.”

“Good,” Ray replied absently, “Because eggs are hard to come by this far out of town.”

“Why don’t you raise some chickens?” Stacy asked. “Then you could have fresh eggs all of the time and wouldn’t have to buy chickens at the market.”

“There’s an idea,” Ray acknowledged, “Stacy, I’m afraid the phone line is still down, so I’m not sure if the road is plowed out yet. At least the wind is gone and it’s quit snowing. I’ll plow the lane out later, but I’m afraid Ryan and you might be stuck here for another day.”

“What do you mean stuck?” Stacy asked, “Aren’t you enjoying our company?”

“Of course I am Stacy, but you have a job to get back to and Ryan has school,” Ray responded.

“I told you that my boss knows I’m out in the country,” Stacy said. “Besides, I’m rather enjoying the peace and quiet, and the company. I have all the vacation I can carry on the books, so I won’t be out any pay. Ryan really wants to shoot. Do you think we can get out this afternoon and do that?”

“I think so,” Ray said, setting her plate and glass of orange juice in front of her. “Do you think Ryan is old enough for his own rifle?”

“He’ll be 14 in a few months,” Stacy replied buttering the pancakes, “I don’t see why not. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I already gave you the parkas, so I have to get something else for the two of you for Christmas,” Ray started.

“You don’t have to do that Ray,” Stacy protested.

“No, but I want to Stacy,” Ray continued. “I was thinking of maybe getting Ryan a Remington 700 ADL in 7.62x51mm caliber with a synthetic stock.”

“Aren’t those awfully expensive?” Stacy asked.

“Actually, they’re one of Remington’s cheaper center fire rifles,” Ray said, “And the 700 is a really good rifle.”

“Whatever you think Ray, is fine with me,” Stacy replied, “I know Ryan will be absolutely thrilled.”

“About what?” Ryan said descending the ladder from the loft.

“Ray and I were just discussing a possible Christmas present Ryan,” Stacy answered her son.

“What would that be?” Ryan asked.

“A surprise Ryan,” Ray laughed. “Pancakes?”

“Sure,” Ryan said, excusing himself to go to the bathroom.

o

After breakfast Stacy and Ray did the dishes and then took turns getting a shower. Ryan had to wait a little for the hot water heater to catch up and he took a shower, too. Ray bundled up in his parka and went out to plow the lane. The 18” of snow was packed pretty hard and it took him a while to get to the road.

If he built a new cabin, it would be closer to the road. If anything, Stacy was even more beautiful today than the day before. Was that really possible, he wondered? Ray also took time to plow a path out to the table and from the table to the 100-yard target. He had targets in the pickup, so he took the time to put one up.

When he returned to the cabin, Ray noticed that Stacy had his stockpot on the stove.

“What are you cooking?” Ray asked.

“I took a beef roast out of the freezer and thought I’d make some beef stew,” Stacy answered, “Is that okay with you?”

“If it’s only half as good as your chicken,” Ray said, “It will be wonderful.”

“Do you have any stew vegetables in your freezer?” Stacy asked.

“I can do better than that,” Ray said, “What do you need?”

“Potatoes, onions, carrots and celery,” Stacy said, “But you probably don’t have any celery.”

“I do have celery Stacy,” Ray said, “Out in the shed. There’s that sandbox in the corner and there are carrots and celery buried in the sand. The carrots are loose, I grew them in my garden, but the celery is from the market. I’ll go get you the vegetables.”

When Ray returned with the vegetables, Stacy said, "You know if you put in some chickens and a hog you'd be pretty self-sufficient."

"I'm not much of a farmer Stacy," Ray said, "Chickens make sense to me, but hogs are a lot of work. By the time you count your labor and the hog feed, it's almost as cheap to buy pork by the case at the Commissary. I buy a case of boneless pork loins and cut them to suit myself. I also buy a case of Boston Butts and have a few of the roasts sawed into pork steak. I buy slab bacon and cut that myself. As far as hams go, you can't beat a Cure 81 as far as I'm concerned, so I buy a few of them."

"What about horses?" Stacy asked. "Do you ride?"

"In the past, some, yes," Ray said, "But I don't have a barn for horses and they're pretty expensive. Why?"

"Just getting to know you a little better," Stacy said. "I have to think about a Christmas present for you too, so I'd appreciate it if you'd write your sizes down for me. I want to know everything from your hat size to your shoe size and all points in between."

"Remind me before you and Ryan leave and I'll take care of that," Ray said. "Let me go get the snowmobiles fired up and we'll go shooting."

"I thought you said you only had one snowmobile," Stacy said, "Or am I remembering wrong?"

"No, I had one snowmobile. Now I have 3," Ray smiled.

"Really?" Stacy commented. "What other surprises do you have for me?"

Ray sort of ignored her question and got his rifles and the M9 from his gun cabinet. He set out 200 rounds of 7.62x51mm match ammo and bundled up to go start the snowmobiles. When he had them warmed up, he drove them, one at a time, naturally, to the front of the cabin.

Back inside, he put the ammo in the pocket of his parka and handed the M9 to Stacy and the M-24 to Ryan. Ryan had better get used to shooting a Remington model 700. He only hoped that going from the M-24 down to a 700 ADL wouldn't be too big of a disappointment for Ryan. He could easily afford the 700 ADL, but a second M-24 was out of reach.

o

Ray only fired a few rounds from the M1A M-21; just enough to keep him sharp. He let Ryan do most of the shooting and by the time Ryan had put 100 rounds down range, he was shooting about a 2" group. That was some good shooting as far as Ray was concerned. With time, Ryan might get down to about a 1" group, but that took one heck of a

lot of practice. A 2" group at 100-yards made the life of any deer the boy came up against forfeit anyway. Still, it would be better to get Ryan to shooting to his potential to cover the jitters that sometimes came when the deer was in the sight.

Stacy was a pretty fair shot with the M9. Ray wondered for a moment where she'd learned to shoot so well. Maybe her father had taught her or maybe it had been Ryan. As a noncom, Ryan would have carried a pistol. He complimented her on her shooting, but she never let on where she'd learned. He really hadn't been fishing anyway. She was a good shot! When the ammo was gone, they got on the snowmobiles and returned to the cabin. Ray got the cleaning equipment out and let each person clean the gun they'd used. He had to show Ryan a little, but Stacy field stripped that M9 like an old hand. "Definitely Ryan," he thought.

o

Stacy took the meat out of the stockpot and cut it up. She then cut up and added the vegetables. She told the men that it would be a couple of hours before dinner was ready. Meanwhile, Ray was thinking about Ryan senior. He wasn't competing with the man for Stacy's affections, but he hoped that he could measure up to the standard the man had set. Fifteen years was a long marriage these days, especially for an Army couple. And, the guy obviously had courage; there was that DSC. Well, he was no slouch himself. Those rows of ribbons on the uniform in the wardrobe attested to that. Still...

Stacy was thinking too. Ray would look pretty good in some western cut clothes. She intended to splurge and get him a genuine Stetson hat if she could find the right color and style in his size. She hadn't told him that she had two horses stabled on a ranch just outside of Jackson. He didn't need to know everything just yet.

She hadn't volunteered that Ryan had taught her to shoot either. He probably figured that out when she field stripped the M9. Ryan had been an excellent shot with all of the guns he used. Ray was pretty good with the M-21 and the M-24, but she hadn't seen him shoot the M9. Oh well, if he'd been a Sergeant Major, he probably was pretty good with it, too.

A little over two hours later, Stacy announced, "Supper's ready. Let's buffet style it and let the stew stay hot on the stove." She'd already sliced the homemade bread. Ray baked a pretty mean loaf of bread, something she'd never gotten the hang of. Together, she reasoned, they made a pretty good team. Enough of that, she had to concentrate on getting to know him better.

So far, Ray had an A+ going on both parts of the sleep test. But, it was early in the new relationship. Like she thought before; 'give it a couple of weeks' and then she'd have a better idea. The way Ray had raved about her chicken and now the beef stew told her nothing. She was a good cook or the man was just tired of his own cooking; it could be either.

Cooks in the Army had ranged from guys who couldn't wash dishes in a choke and puke to Master Chefs. Over the years, Ray had eaten food prepared by all of them. Stacy was a Master Chef as far as Ray was concerned. Being pretty and sexy had nothing to do with whether or not a woman could cook. Stacy was pretty, sexy and could cook with the best of them. He'd tried to convey that to her, through his compliments, but he didn't know if she'd believed him. She probably just thought he was tired of his own cooking. That was true, he WAS tired of his own cooking, but he was no slouch in the cooking department either.

o

Ryan had really enjoyed shooting the Remington rifle. It was pretty fancy with that adjustable stock and everything, he rather have a plain rifle when he got a rifle. His Mom didn't seem to be inclined to buy him one either. They were so expensive and she was intent on putting money away so he could go to college. Ryan had already decided that he wanted to go to West Point and be in the Army like his father. He hadn't told his Mom yet, that way he could change his mind and she'd never know the difference. But, he was definitely going to West Point if they'd have him.

This Ray guy wasn't anything like Ryan thought he'd be like at first. When he'd seen that military style haircut, he figured the guy would be all spit and polish. Well, his shoes were spit shined, but Ray was pretty laid back. He didn't seem to be in a hurry nor did he pressure Ryan.

Those other guys that his Mom had dated sort of looked at him like he was the excess baggage that came along with dating his Mom. None of them had shown the least bit of interest in him. Ray was different, when he was doing something with Ryan; Ray was fully concentrated on what he and Ryan were doing. His Mom was just there, and the guy didn't break his concentration to leer at Mom. He focused on the task at hand, like getting Ryan to improve his hold on the rifle. Ryan had remembered that his Dad didn't like to be called Sarge, so from now on he was going to call him Ray.

o

Stacy noticed that both of the men, her young man and her new boyfriend as Ryan put it were both lost in thought. That was ok; she was half lost in thought herself. The thought had crossed her mind as to whether her husband would have approved of Ray. They had talked about the possibility of his getting killed; it had been a tough discussion that she hadn't wanted to hear.

Ryan had been clear about her not sitting around being a widow for the rest of her life. "Take your time, find the right guy and marry him," Ryan had said. "Each love is unique and just because I'm gone doesn't mean that you can't have a life. Besides, our love will endure your remarrying; it will just take a different place in your heart." Ryan was pretty smart she had to admit. There very well could be a place in her heart for another love.

Ryan Jr. would always be there to remind Stacy of his father. Ryan looked a lot like his father, too. She had a whole box of photos of her husband, dating from when he was a boy to when he was a grown man. So far, Ryan was the spitting image of his father growing up. Ray didn't seem to be the least bit threatened by her child. When he spent time with Ryan, he concentrated on Ryan. He didn't let her presence distract him; maybe that should be an A++ on the sleep test.

o

Ray checked the phone line after dinner. Dial tone had been restored. He went on the net and checked the Weather Channel. It looked like the earlier estimates were wrong and the storm had blown through. As much as he hated it, he was going to have to tell Stacy that they could leave in the morning if they wanted to. But, if they wanted to stay another day, that was fine with him. Maybe they could go snowmobiling. He'd tell her later tonight.

Stacy saw that Ray had the Weather Channel up on the computer. That meant that the phone line was working again and that the roads were open. Drat. She had plenty of vacation and there wasn't any reason for her to hurry back to work, her boss had said so. She would wait and see what Ray had to say.

He hadn't noticed that she had seen him bringing up the Weather Channel; she had been sitting there reading the book with her back turned to him. But, she'd heard the modem make the connection and had turned around to see Ray looking at the forecast. Stacy was an excellent poker player and if she had to bet, she'd put her money on him telling her tonight.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Ray asked.

"No thank you," Stacy replied.

Ryan took the hint and headed for bed. He might be slow, but he wasn't stupid. And, he really wasn't slow either, not if his grades were any sign of anything. Oh, he'd had a little trouble at the start of 8th grade, but things were coming along nicely now. He should still make all A's and B's this semester. That was important if he wanted to get into West Point.

Ray let Promise out for the last time of the night while Stacy got ready for bed. When Promise was through, he threw an extra log on the fire and undressed. He slipped into bed with Stacy.

"Stacy, the phone line is back up and the Weather Channel says the storm has blown through," Ray reported. "With the lane open, Ryan and you will be able to return to town tomorrow if you wish."

“Come here, you,” Stacy said embracing him. Between kisses she said, “Actually, I have plenty of vacation, I was thinking of staying one more day.”

o

Ray was up bright and early as usual the next morning. He had let Promise out and had the coffee going. He was out of eggs, so they had a choice of pancakes or pancakes for breakfast. But, just in case, he went out to the shed and brought in some boxes of cereal that Stacy bought. Let’s see, that improved the choice to include oatmeal, Life cereal or pancakes. He made a fresh pitcher of juice and sat down at the table to enjoy his coffee.

Ryan was the first one up this morning. Ray explained his breakfast options after he’d used the bathroom and Ryan opted for cereal and toast. Ray put the box of cereal and the carton of milk on the table, poured Ryan a glass of juice and set about making the toast. He was down to one full loaf and a part of a loaf of bread. He’d have to take time to bake tomorrow.

While the bread was rising, he could finish splitting the kindling, too. He wanted to get to Jackson and get Ryan’s rifle ordered if they didn’t have one in stock. That could wait a day, he had to finish the wood and bake bread.

Stacy was slow rising this morning. She hadn’t had so much loving since 1992 and she was tired. She noticed that Ryan had beaten her awake and was sitting at the table eating cereal and toast.

“Cereal and toast looks good to me,” she remarked on her way to the bathroom. By the time she was finished and washed up, there was a glass of juice, an empty bowl and spoon and two slices of toast on the table for her. “Better service than a restaurant,” she thought.

“Well boys,” Stacy said, “What is it to be today?”

“Snowmobiling,” both of them answered at the same time.

“Snowmobiling it will be,” she said pouring milk on her cereal. “Hmm, blackberry jam, my favorite,” She thought. Oh, that’s right, she’d bought it so why was she surprised it was on the table? She did notice that quite a bit of the jam was gone. Maybe everyone liked blackberry jam.

Ray went ahead and got his shower while Ryan and Stacy were eating. Ryan was done eating next and he took his turn. Stacy had to wait a few minutes for the hot water heater to recover. While she did, Ray set three small fanny packs on the table.

“These are BOB’s,” Ray said, “That’s short for Bug Out Bags. They are the 72-hour variety and they have a few emergency supplies in them. We don’t want to get that far from the cabin without emergency supplies, even though we probably won’t need them.”

“What’s in them?” Stacy asked.

“Not a lot really,” Ray said, “A Swiss army knife, some fire starters, a 12-hour candle, some paracord, a small first aid kit, some plastic bags, a few packages of water and three 3,600 calorie lifeboat rations. The contents sort of vary by season.”

◦

The water was hot so Stacy went ahead and took her shower. Ryan had a different makeup to the BOB’s he kept for them, but she supposed that every person made their own to suit them. It was a good thing she put in their long johns, it would probably be cold on those snowmobiles. When she was toweled off, she got dressed for the weather.

Before they left, Ray handed her the M9 with a holster, belt and two extra magazines. She noticed that he had strapped on a .45 and had 4 magazines for it. He also had a large hunting knife. A person could cut down a small tree with that knife. By the time she finished getting dressed and her fanny pack, parka and mittens on, the boys were outside waiting for her. Promise was the smart one; she was curled up by the fireplace sound asleep.

Ray led them to a gate that opened to his neighbor’s farm. It was actually more than a farm, it was a large spread and there were plenty of places to take the snowmobiles. There was left over beef stew in the refrigerator, so they wouldn’t have to worry about getting back to fix supper. But, it was pretty cold and there was Promise to let out. They spent 4 hours on the snowmobiles. By the time they got back to the cabin, long johns or not, Stacy was cold to the core. She let Promise out while she added some kindling to the stove and heated up the coffee. Ray and Ryan parked the snowmobiles and let Promise back in.

Maybe it had been a little brisk for snowmobiling Ray had decided, but it wouldn’t get any better for some time. At least not any warmer; it got pretty cold in Jackson Hole Valley in the winter. Stacy had completely forgotten she was wearing the Beretta and gave him a strange look when he held out his hand to get the gun to put it up. Then, she blushed and handed him the belt. Funny about that, she really had completely forgotten she was wearing a gun.

◦

Stacy put the stew on to heat. Maybe some hot food would get rid of the chill. Ray added two logs to the fire and slowly she thawed out. It really wasn’t any colder out here in the country than in town she reflected, but it sure seemed like it. As much as she hated

the idea, they would have to leave in an hour or two. She didn't want to make the drive back to Jackson in the dark, not on these roads.

"I have to come to town the day after tomorrow Stacy," Ray said, "Will you be free for lunch?"

"Sure," Stacy said, "Don't forget you're out of eggs."

"I have a lot of shopping to do in Jackson on Thursday," Ray responded. "I'll remember."

"I wonder what he meant by that?" Stacy asked herself.

They left a while later to get to town before dark. She planted a good one on him.

Mountain Man – Chapter 6 – Christmas Shopping

“Darn,” Stacy said halfway back to town, “I forgot to remind Ray to give me his sizes.”

“That’s ok Mom,” Ryan said, “Ray said he would be in town on Thursday. Why don’t you invite him to stay the night?”

“Where would he sleep?” Stacy asked, “That old couch isn’t very good to sleep on.”

“He’d sleep with you, of course,” Ryan said matter of factly.

“Ryan!” Stacy said, “That wouldn’t be proper.”

“Why not Mom?” Ryan said, “You slept with him. Come on Mom, I’m not a little kid anymore. I know about sex and stuff. It’s ok, I like Ray.”

“How much do you like Ray?” Stacy asked, taken aback by Ryan’s openness.

“Enough that it’s ok with me if you marry him,” Ryan said, “That’s what you really want to know. Right Mom? Anyway it’s ok as long as I don’t have to call him Dad.”

“Ryan, where did you get the idea I’d like to marry Ray?” Stacy asked.

“I didn’t say that you wanted to marry him Mom,” Ryan protested, “I just said it was ok with me if that’s what you wanted and that was what you really wanted to know.”

“I don’t think you’d ever have to worry about Ray wanting you to call him Dad,” Stacy suggested.

“I don’t either,” Ryan said. “Ray may have never met my father but he sure seems to think a lot of him.”

“You know Ryan, Ray was in the Army for 30 years,” Stacy said. “He knows how much it takes to earn a DSC. They don’t hand those out like the Purple Hearts. You really have to earn a DSC.”

“Did he ask you yet?” Ryan asked.

“Ask me what Ryan?” Stacy quizzed.

“Did he ask you to marry him, Mom?” Ryan persisted.

“No. Where did you get an idea like that Ryan?” Stacy asked.

“From Ray,” Ryan replied.

“Did Ray say something to you?” Stacy asked, suddenly concerned.

“No. But it’s a guy thing Mom. I could tell. Ray is really stuck on you,” Ryan answered. “And let’s face it Mom, you don’t have a bad bod for a Mom.”

“Ryan! Where did you learn to talk like that?” Stacy demanded.

“At school,” Ryan said, “All the guys say you have a pretty hot bod for a Mom.”

Ryan it seemed was growing up a whole lot faster than Stacy had realized. Well, he was almost 14 and boys started to notice girls sometime around that age. She was flattered, in a way, that he thought she had a good bod. Well if Ryan was thinking about bods and stuff what must Ray be thinking?

o

Right about then Ray was thinking that Stacy really had a hot bod. Damn, she had been gone less than an hour and he was already missing her. It was far too soon to be thinking about asking Stacy to marry him, but nevertheless, the thought had crossed his mind more than once. What was a man of 51 doing thinking about marrying a beautiful young woman 8 years his junior?

Damn, she did have a hot bod, too, he laughed to himself. At the moment, Ray was thinking with the head on the top of his shoulders, mostly. There was Ryan to consider. He really liked Ryan; he was a fine young man. Probably looked just like his father too. But, the best he’d managed in the medals department was the Bronze Star, 3 Purple Hearts and a lot of campaign ribbons.

Ray decided to change the sheets on the bed. Stacy’s lingering scent would keep him awake all night. Awake and half turned on, he reflected as he stripped the bed. Promise had sometimes slept with him, but she was forever banished from his bed. Promise already seemed to know that and was curled up by the fireplace, snoring.

After he’d changed the bed, Ray went on the net for a while. He hunted around for cabin plans, but he didn’t find anything he liked better than the rough sketch he’d managed to come up with. Speaking of which, maybe the cabin ought to face south. That would give his PV panels a more direct shot at the sun.

Ray got to looking around at all kinds of things about homes and alternative energy and things like that and discovered that they made a thin film roof covering that generated electricity. Hmm. Maybe he could cover the south roof with some of that stuff if he got around to building a new cabin.

Another website talked about water heaters that combined solar heating with gas heating. That was a problem since he didn’t have gas. Wait a minute; he did too, he thought,

remembering the propane space heater and the propane hot water heater. Maybe he could adapt the water heater to run on both solar-heated water and on propane.

Before he realized it, Ray had been on the net well past midnight. If Promise hadn't gone to the door and barked, he might have ended up spending the whole night on the Internet. He let Promise out to do her thing, did the same himself and undressed for bed. Tomorrow he had to bake bread and finish splitting the wood. Darn, Stacy had forgotten to remind him to give her his sizes, too. He sat down at the table and wrote the size of everything he wore on a sheet of paper, and then crawled into the bed. He was asleep almost before his head hit the pillow.

◦

Before he'd died, Stacy's uncle, her mother's brother, had given Ryan and her each a two year old Arabian Filly. She kept the horses on her cousin's ranch/stable and he only charged her for the feed. Otherwise, she couldn't have afforded to keep the horses.

The Arabians were fine horses and almost worth their weight in gold. Well, maybe not gold, but silver for sure. She suspected that her cousin only charged her a fraction of what it really cost to feed the horses, but she liked to ride, as did Ryan, and she was more than willing to accept her cousin's charity.

Stacy didn't know and would probably never know that her Dad and Mom made up the difference. It wasn't that the nephew wasn't charitable, but they know how much it cost to keep a horse.

The saddles and bridles were the finest hand tooled leathers too, another gift from the uncle. There were even rifle scabbards, though they left them off because they had no rifles. Ryan had had to grow into the saddle but he was getting big enough that he fit pretty well. As the expression went, both she and Ryan sat a fine saddle. She wondered if Ray could really ride a horse or was just a wannabe. Maybe they could take him out to the ranch come spring and find out. As for Ryan's suggestion, it sounded good to her. She would invite Ray to spend the night Thursday.

◦

The morning came too early for Ray. Today, there was bread to bake, so he stoked up the fireplace and the woodstove and after letting Promise out, got a shower. He made coffee and some toast and heaped it with blackberry jam. Pretty good stuff, he'd have to stock up on that when he went to town on Thursday.

He got out his large bread pan and a water glass and got the yeast to going. He measured the flour and other ingredients and added the yeast. When he'd kneaded the bread enough, he formed the loaves and put them in the pan. He put on a medium weight jacket and went outside to split the remaining wood. He finished up around noon and went into the house. It was perfect timing. He stoked the stove just before the loaves

were ready to go in the oven and when they were ready, put them in. From here on, it was a pretty automatic thing. He could take the bread out any time after it was done baking because the fire would die out and stop the baking process. He made himself some lunch.

That was a good thing too. Like the night before, Ray got interested in some things on the net and if Promise hadn't needed to go out around 6pm, he would have been sitting there at midnight. He took the bread out of the oven and covered it with a cloth towel. It wouldn't need to be put in plastic bags until the next morning. Sure did smell good. Ray made himself a light dinner and refilled the dog's food hopper. He went back on the net, but gave up around 9pm when fatigue overtook him. As he was crawling in bed, Ray realized that he'd been occupied all day and hadn't thought about Stacy a single time. That, he decided, was a healthy sign.

o

Tomorrow, Ray had to get Ryan a Remington, check out the Jewelry store, get some blackberry jam and eggs and take Stacy to lunch. He didn't intend to buy anything at the Jewelry store, but for some reason, he had a yearning to look at what they had, just in case. He drifted off to sleep and slept well past his usual rising time.

He would have still been sleeping if Promise hadn't licked him the face to wake him up so she could go out. Speaking of which, Ray had trained Promise to use a box just like most people trained their cats. That way, if he were gone too long and Promise were left inside; she wouldn't mess on the floor. It had been hard to do, but it wasn't much different, he supposed, from teaching a dog to use a newspaper for its business.

Ray put the bread in plastic bags and set out two changes of underwear, his dress up outfit and a change of work clothes. Maybe, he thought, Ryan and Stacy would like to go out to dinner. He could get a room at the motel and come back tomorrow. The budget motel he usually stayed at had a small refrigerator, so the eggs would keep.

With Promise all set and his clothes in the pickup, Ray headed to Jackson. Ray had paid extra on the 401k loan and should have it paid off in another year. He still had plenty of money left in his checking account. He got to the gun shop and asked about the Remington.

The NICS wasn't scheduled to go into effect for a few more days on November 30, 1998. That wouldn't have been particularly important, in fact, it wasn't important, but Ray spotted a used Colt SAA .45 Colt. He had always wanted to own one of the Colts. The price was right, he had the money and on a whim, he bought the gun. He also bought a used Winchester rifle in .45 Colt and Ryan's Remington 700 ADL in 7.62x51mm. Under the Brady law, he had to wait for his background check to clear, so he paid for the guns and told the guy he come back in a week. Thanksgiving was just a week from today, so the dealer told him to pick them up either the day before or the day after Thanksgiving.

Shortly after moving to Wyoming, Ray had applied for a concealed carry permit. He showed his discharge papers to the local Sheriff and the Sheriff had requested that the Wyoming Attorney General expedite the permit application. The permit cost \$50, but it was good for 5 years. Ray had his permit within a week. Mind you, he didn't carry a concealed weapon, but he did have the concealed carry permit.

After the gun store, Ray went by the Jewelry store. He looked at the diamonds and the wedding rings that weren't part of sets. He really liked a heavily engraved band he saw in the case. Ray was standing in front of the market when Stacy came out at 1:05.

"Hi Stacy," Ray said giving her an abbreviated hug, "Do you want to eat at the same restaurant?"

"Ray, we can probably even get the same booth," Stacy replied cheerfully. "Get all of you shopping done?"

"I got the rifle for Ryan, Stacy," Ray said, "I will either pick it up the day before or the day after Thanksgiving."

"He'll be really pleased," Stacy said. "Speaking of Ryan, you can't imagine what he came up with on the way back to town on Tuesday."

"Do tell." Ray said.

Stacy recounted the conversation she'd had with Ryan on the way back to town. Ray laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Stacy asked.

"Well, to be perfectly honest, just about time Ryan was telling you that you had a nice bod, I was thinking the same thing myself," Ray explained.

"Is that all you men ever thing about is nice bods?" Stacy kidded.

"No, but it helps pass the time," Ray admitted. "You do you know."

"Know what?" Stacy asked.

"You have a nice bod," Ray smiled.

"Why thank you kind sir, you aren't half bad yourself," Stacy played along.

"Oh, before I forget, again," Ray said, "Here are those sizes I forgot to give to you."

"What other shopping did you have to do?" Stacy asked.

“I went by the Jewelry store, just to get some ideas,” Ray admitted.

“Ideas about what, if I may ask,” Stacy said.

“You know, ideas,” Ray hesitated to open the subject.

“Well, if you ever do decide to ask me to marry you, you have Ryan’s approval,” Stacy laughed.

“That’s good to know Stacy,” Ray said, “But I’d rather have his Mom’s approval.”

“Ask me again on Thanksgiving,” Stacy said.

“What does Thanksgiving have to do with it?” Ray wanted to know.

“My mother wants you to join Ryan and me at their house for Thanksgiving, Ray,” Stacy said, “I hope you will say yes.”

“I would be delighted, if you’re sure it’s ok,” Ray said.

Stacy laid her hand on Ray’s and looked him directly in the eye. “It’s more than ok Ray, but I won’t insist.”

“Meet you at your house on Thanksgiving morning?” Ray asked.

“The night before would be perfectly ok with me,” Stacy said, “And Ryan, too.”

They placed their orders and resumed the conversation.

“I was wondering if Ryan and you would like to go out for dinner tonight?” Ray asked.

“We would be delighted,” Stacy said. “After lunch, you pick out your groceries and I’ll bring them back to my apartment.”

“I was thinking of just getting a motel room,” Ray said.

“You’ll do no such thing Ray Benton,” Stacy said sharply, “Ryan would tear me a new one.”

“Ryan up to speed on the birds and the bees thing?” Ray asked.

“Are you kidding,” Stacy said, “He practically a professor.”

“And he doesn’t mind?” Ray asked.

“The only thing Ryan said was that he wouldn’t call you Dad,” Stacy said.

“I’d never ask,” Ray said.

“That’s what I told him,” Stacy said.

“So, you’ve been talking to Ryan about getting married?” Ray asked.

“No Ray,” Stacy said, “It’s like I told you, he brought the subject up on the way back to town Tuesday night.”

“Just making sure,” Ray ducked the issue.

The waitress brought their food and they visited while they ate. After they’d finished, Ray followed Stacy back to the market and picked up 6 jars of blackberry jam and two dozen eggs. He explained to Stacy that he had developed a fondness for the blackberry jam; they didn’t serve much beside grape jelly in the military chow halls and it was all her fault, he was hooked on the stuff.

Stacy told Ray to come by around 5pm, he’d probably want to clean up and change before the three of them went out to dinner. Ray told Stacy he would be there on time. Stacy didn’t doubt that for a minute.

o

Here he was with 2½ hours to kill. Ray hadn’t bought any .45 Colt ammunition so he went back to the gun store. Ray had lots of 7.62x51mm ammo and 5.56x45mm ammo. He also had a pretty good assortment for his 12-gauge shotgun and his 9mm and .45 acp. He sort of figured a man ought to have a good supply of ammo for every gun he owned. The two new weapons were the same caliber so that meant that he wouldn’t have to buy but one size of ammunition.

The dealer had some full power factory rounds Ray bought 1,000 rounds. He might have bought more, but that was all that would fit behind the seat in the Ford. The dealer had a used western rig that had seen better days, but a little saddle soap and maybe some oil and it would do Ray just fine. It fit like a glove and that was the main thing anyway.

The time he spent in the gun store ate up half of the time he had to kill. Ray went shopping for clothes, but didn’t buy any because he wasn’t sure what Stacy had in mind to buy him for Christmas. And, he was trying to get ideas for a present for her. Of course he had a present in mind, him; but he still needed a gift for her.

Maybe Stacy’s mother would have some ideas for him; he’d ask her a week from today. He looked at his watch it was 4:30. He saw a new computer game and asked. It had just

come out the day before, so he hoped Ryan didn't have it yet. He bought the game for Ryan and headed to Stacy's apartment.

He pulled up just as Stacy and Ryan were arriving from her mother's. Hmm, he blew that, he was 10 minutes late and Ray liked to be on time. Ray grabbed his bag, his plastic case covering his dress up clothes and the game he'd bought for Ryan. He rang the doorbell and Ryan answered the door.

"Hi Ray," Ryan said, "Mom's bedroom is on the left at the end of the hall."

Any lingering doubt Ray had about Ryan's attitude about this whole business evaporated with that statement. He took his clothes down the hall. Stacy must be in the bathroom since he didn't see her anywhere. He hung his clothes in the closet and set the bag on the floor. He returned to the living room to give Ryan the new game. Stacy was in the kitchen that was why he hadn't seen her.

"Ryan, have you seen this new game?" Ray asked, handing Ryan the game.

"Neat. I saw it on TV, but Mom said I couldn't have it," Ryan said accepting the gift.

"Mom can I..."

"Go ahead Ryan," Stacy replied from the kitchen.

"Ray, you're going to spoil him rotten," Stacy said. "Trying to get on his mother's good side are you?"

"Do you have a bad side?" he asked giving her the once over. "Actually I was just killing time and I saw the game. They said it just came out yesterday, so I took a chance that Ryan didn't have it."

"Likely story," Stacy laughed. "Go ahead and get cleaned up and dressed Ray and I'll go next." She punctuated her sentence with one of those breath-taking kisses of hers. Ray showered, shaved and brushed a layer off the fangs. When he'd finished dressing, he joined Stacy in the kitchen.

"The couch looks pretty comfortable," Ray said.

"My bed is a whole lot more comfortable," Stacy said, "And it has a built in bed warmer, me."

"Is that fresh coffee?" he asked, changing the subject for now.

"Help yourself, I'm going to get cleaned up," Stacy said.

Ray would have offered to wash her back, but things were already going faster than a runaway train on a mountain. He had to put the brakes on. Just this noon, she had as much as told him to ask her to marry him on Thanksgiving. Hadn't she? Yes, she sure had.

She hadn't said she would say yes, but why would she tell him to ask her again on Thanksgiving if she was planning on saying no? Ray didn't realize that he had a week to go on the sleep test. Stacy had decided, after much thought, that if Ray held true to form, and he did ask her to marry him on Thanksgiving, she was going to say yes. Ray was only a man. If he were going to get possessive, it would come in the next week or not at all. She had one final test in mind.

◦

When Stacy and Ryan were ready, the three of them left for dinner. Ray had asked if the Lodge were ok and she readily agreed. Good, he'd made a reservation; just in case (Ray does a lot of things, just in case). They were seated and Stacy ordered her gimlet. Ryan ordered a coke and Ray surprised Stacy by ordering an old fashioned, bourbon.

"Bourbon, Huh?" Stacy thought, "That explains a lot." All of the men whom she'd met and who could be described as genteel had been bourbon drinkers; like Ryan for example. Ryan went for the shrimp dinner, Stacy did the filet again and Ray stuck with the Sirloin. When they finished their cocktails Ray asked Stacy if she wanted wine with the meal.

"Actually, no, if you don't mind," Stacy said, "I don't usually drink much at all. I've had more to drink since I met you than probably in the entire previous year. But go ahead if you want to."

"That's an odd coincidence, Stacy," Ray smiled, "I've had more to drink since I met you than I'd normally drink in a year or so myself. I have a bottle of bourbon back at the cabin that I bought in 1995 when I got out. It's half full."

"Oh, an optimist," Stacy thought.

Ray got Ryan to tell him about school and Ryan went off on a tangent about an English paper he had to do. The teacher only gave them a week to do a 3-page paper.

"Just wait until you get to college Ryan and they give you 50 minutes to do a 3-page paper," Ray said.

"Did you go to college?" Stacy asked. "I had the impression you went into the Army right out of High School."

"I did Stacy," Ray acknowledged, "But I had a lot of free nights after Vietnam. I have a BA in Business and Economics and an MBA. Let me tell you, it took a lot of night school

to get those degrees. Fortunately, I was stationed at Ft. Campbell for most of my career.”

“Wow,” Ryan said.

“If you go to a military academy young man,” Ray said, “You’ll have a chance at getting a Master’s degree and possibly even a PhD. All at the government’s expense.”

“Gee, I’d have to go to school my whole life,” Ryan replied.

“Ryan, life is a learning experience that never stops,” Ray countered.

“No even when you get old like you?” Ryan innocently asked.

Ouch! “It gets even worse when you get old like me,” Ray laughed.

“I, uh, didn’t mean that the way it sounded,” Ryan quickly corrected himself, “I meant older like you.”

“Nice recovery,” Ray thought.

“I’m going to kill that boy,” Stacy thought.

Well that was about enough conversation. They visited on lighter subjects through the meal and headed back to the apartment. Ryan disappeared into his room the minute they got home.

“I see he wants to play the new game,” Ray observed.

“More likely hiding out after that crack he made,” Stacy suggested.

“Come on Stacy,” Ray enjoined. “We were all young once and when I was 13, someone thirty was positively old. I’m 51 give him some slack. Besides, I thought it was a nice recovery.”

“Are you ready for bed?” Stacy asked.

“We can go to bed or watch some TV,” Ray answered, “Your choice.”

“I can give you just as good a show as what you can see on TV and you don’t have to worry about the rating,” she suggested.

Ray took her by the hand and led her to the bedroom.

o

The next morning Ray had to agree with her comment of the previous night, Stacy could put on quite a show and it would never make it past the network censors. To be honest, Ray found it hard to believe she was actually 43 years old. Well, 44, he guessed in another month. That made it even more difficult to believe. Wait a minute, she said she been born in 1955, so that meant that she was 42 going on 43, not 43 going on 44. He'd better never make that mistake again; some women were so fussy about their ages.

Stacy left for work and Ryan for school. Ray got his things around and got ready to head back to the cabin. These last few weeks had been like a real soap opera. Oh well, he thought, what had that guy said? "yep. What a TV series." Was that criticism he detected? He didn't think so, in fact he hoped not, he picked up his marbles and headed home.

Mountain Man – Chapter 7 – Wedding Bells

Everything had been going so fast and now the time seemed to drag for Ray. Ok, he had decided, he would ask Stacy to marry him on Thanksgiving. If she said no, he'd be no worse off than he was and would be spared the need to build a new cabin.

If she said yes, she would probably want to put it off until spring, so he would have plenty of time to get used to the idea of getting married and would be able to get started on a new cabin. Could it be, readers, that Ray didn't really understand Stacy as well as he thought he did? Remember, they had only known each other a very short time. He hadn't exposed his warts and maybe she hadn't exposed hers. But, he'd bet they were pretty warts!

The Wednesday, before Thanksgiving, finally came. Ray left for town about 2 pm. Fortunately, it hadn't snowed again and he made good time. He stopped by the gun store and picked up the two rifles and the revolver.

Stacy had said something about horses, so he bought the used rifle scabbard the rifle had come in. \$5 was cheap at half, or was that twice the price? Anyway the rifle and the scabbard made a matched set. A little more saddle soap and a little oil and it would look as good as the used gun belt he'd bought.

He was done at the gun store quickly and took a chance Ryan might be home. He drove over to Stacy's apartment and saw that her car was there. He put the guns behind the seat and made sure the doors to the Ford were locked. He took his suit bag and duffle bag and headed for the apartment. He ran the door bell and Stacy answered the door.

"Hi beautiful," Ray said.

"Save the sweet talk for later," Stacy kidded.

"I have a bit of a problem Stacy," Ray said, "I picked up Ryan's gun today, but I don't want to leave it in the truck all night and I can't bring it in here."

"Let's run over to my folks Ray," Stacy suggested, "We can leave Ryan here."

o

Gulp. It was time to meet the parents. Thirty years in the Army hadn't prepared him for this. What was it that Ray usually said at times like this? "Oh, well."

Stacy told Ryan that Ray and she had to run an errand and that they would be back in 30 minutes. That would, she reminded him, give him just enough time to clean up his room.

Stacy directed Ray to her parents' home. It was only about 8 blocks away. Ray got the two rifles and the revolver from behind the seat.

"Going cowboy on me?" Stacy asked when she saw the Winchester and the Colt.

"I always wanted a Colt SAA Stacy," Ray explained. "I got the used revolver and the used rifle for about half of what a new Colt revolver costs. So, I bought it on a whim."

"That's a likely story," Stacy kidded. "Can you really ride a horse?"

"I was on a horse from age 5 to age 18 Stacy," Ray said. "But I haven't ridden a lot since. Just enough so I can still sit a saddle."

Stacy opened the door to her parents' home.

"Mom, Dad, I brought company," She hollered out.

Stacy's Dad came out of the living room and her Mom out of the kitchen.

"Mom, Dad, meet Ray," she announced. "Ray, let me introduce my father Roy Benton and my mother Hazel."

Ray handed the Remington to Stacy and shook Roy's hand. "Pleased to me you sir," he said. He extended his hand to Stacy's mother and said "Mrs. Benson."

"Come on in and it's Roy, Ray," Roy chuckled. This was going to be fun, having a potential son-in-law with a name so similar to his.

"Please call me Hazel, Ray," Hazel said.

"What's with all the artillery, Ray?" Roy asked.

"The Remington is a Christmas present for Ryan and I needed some place to keep it besides my truck," Ray said. "I also picked myself up a couple of used guns and hoped you might hold them for me for a day."

"Let me see the rifle you bought Ryan," Roy said. Ray retrieved the rifle box from Stacy and handed it to Roy.

Roy opened the box. "That's a humdinger," Roy said. "We bought him a .22 for Christmas so it looks like Ryan is going to really be set. Never much cared for the look of those synthetic stocks myself but they're a lot more practical. The .22 has a synthetic stock, too."

"What did you buy him?" Ray asked.

“Got him one of those Ruger 77/22’s with a black synthetic stock and a stainless action.” Roy replied.

“I looked at those,” Ray said, “They cost about \$100 more than the Remington. Boy is Ryan going to be surprised.”

Roy chuckled, again. “Actually, we probably paid about the same Ray,” Roy explained. “I’ve been buying guns from that guy for years and I get a reasonable discount. I only gave \$500 for the Ruger.”

“You’re right Roy,” Ray admitted, “We paid exactly the same. And the Ruger is a lot cheaper to shoot.”

“Here, let’s get those guns put away and have some coffee or something,” Roy said opening his gun safe.

“We really have to run Roy, Ryan is home alone,” Ray replied.

“Nonsense,” Roy said, “The boy is almost 14 years old. He can take care of himself. Besides, his mother probably only gave him a half hour to clean up his room. It will take him twice that long, if he even bothers to try and clean it up.”

The men walked into the kitchen.

“Would you like coffee, a beer or something stronger?” Roy asked.

Ray looked to Stacy for guidance, but she was drinking a beer so that made it simple, “I’ll take a beer Roy, thanks.”

Roy handed Ray a beer and the four of them sat down at the kitchen table.

“So, you’re the big bad Army vet who swept my Stacy off her feet, huh?”

“Daddy!” Stacy protested.

“Hush up Stacy,” Roy said, “That’s all we’ve heard for two weeks is Ray this and Ray that.”

“Has she asked you to marry her yet?” Roy pressed.

“Not at all Roy,” Ray responded, “But to tell you the truth, I’ve been thinking a bit along those lines myself.”

By this time, Stacy was a red as a beet. The way that her father and Ray were talking about her; like she wasn’t even here. Her mother had no sympathy for Stacy. This discussion was bound to come up Roy being Roy.

“Well, what’s keeping you?” Roy asked.

“Actually Roy, I had planned on proposing tomorrow. Do I take it that I have your permission?” Ray asked.

“Since when in the last 40 years did any man bother to ask a father’s permission?” Roy laughed. “Of course you have my permission. That is if she’ll still have you after this conversation.”

Now for the final test Stacy had dreamed up.

“I don’t know if I can say yes, Ray,” Stacy cooed, “I had a fella ask me for a date for Friday night and it wouldn’t be proper to go on a date with another man if I were engaged.”

“No problem Stacy,” Ray said. “If you want, Ryan can come home with me so you and your date can have some privacy. I’ll just put off proposing for a couple of months until you’ve had time to decide what you want.”

Ray didn’t have any idea that he had been set up. His offer was genuine and Stacy could see that in his eyes. This man had the self-confidence and the lack of possessiveness she needed to know about. He’d just passed all of the tests. She had no doubt that he loved her and he was smooth. Yep. He was the man for her.

“Why don’t you propose now?” Stacy asked.

Gulp.

“Stacy will you marry me?” Ray asked.

“Oh, yes, of course,” Stacy said and kissed him.

Ray didn’t feel comfortable kissing in front of Stacy’s parents, but the ball was in her court.

“Welcome to the family, Ray,” Roy said. “Let’s see that will make you Stacy Marie Benton Williams Benton. Pretty confusing if you ask me.”

“I think I’ll just go by Stacy Williams Benton, Daddy,” Stacy said. “I need to keep the Williams in my name for Ryan’s sake, so it will just be switching the two names around from Stacy Benton Williams to Stacy Williams Benton.”

“Still pretty confusing if you ask me,” Roy said.

“Shut up Roy,” Hazel said. “Congratulations you two. When is the happy event going to take place?”

“December 28th,” Stacy said.

“Don’t I get a say in this?” Ray asked.

“Of course, silly,” Stacy replied, “You get to say I Do.”

o

Ray was thinking all of the way back to Stacy’s apartment. “I’ve been had,” he thought. “I don’t know how I know that, but I’ve been had.”

Ryan had his room half cleaned up. Not bad for only an hour and a half.

“Ryan,” Stacy called, “I have some news for you.”

“When’s the wedding?” Ryan asked coming out of his room.

Now Ray was really confused. Even Ryan seemed to know all about it and he hadn’t even decided until yesterday that he was going to ask Stacy for sure.

“The 28th of December,” Stacy said, “The day after my birthday.”

“Neat Mom, you’ll get double presents every year,” Ryan said. “Oh, so I suppose that means I’ll have to ride a bus to school, huh?”

“Ryan, I’ve been thinking about that,” Stacy replied. “You could ride the bus, or if you’d rather, and if Ray agrees, you could live with your grandfather and grandmother until the school year is over.”

“It’s up to you Ryan,” Ray said, getting with the program in record time. “I won’t be building a new cabin until spring and summer, so you won’t have your own room until then. Either way is fine with me. You can come out on the weekends if you like. I’d be glad to drive to town Friday nights and pick you up after school and drive you back on Sunday afternoons.”

“Won’t that mess up your shooting schedule?” Ryan asked.

“No big deal, I’ll just switch to Saturday afternoons,” Ray responded.

“Ok, I’ll have to think about it,” Ryan said.

“Take all the time you need Ryan,” Ray said. “This is a pretty grownup decision you have to make.”

“Ok, thanks Ray,” Ryan said, “Mom, I’ll have to think about it.”

“Of course Ryan, take your time,” Stacy said, “It’s a big decision.”

“Well, goodnight,” Ryan said and went to his room.

◦

“I want to talk to you Stacy,” Ray said with mock sternness. “Why do I feel like I’ve just been had?”

“Don’t try that fake sternness on me Ray Benton,” Stacy laughed, “Your eyes give you away.”

“You’re evading the question Stacy,” Ray insisted, “Why do I have the feeling that I’ve been had?”

“Oh, probably because you’ve been had Ray,” Stacy replied. “Now do you want to spend all night in the living room talking about being had, or to you want another floorshow?”

“Somehow, I don’t think that it would resolve anything if we talked all night,” Ray laughed, “So, I guess I’ll go for the floorshow.”

◦

Ray woke up the next morning exhausted but with a smile on his face. He was engaged to be married. He hadn’t planned on getting married until spring, but if Ryan decided to stay with his grandparents then the cabin wouldn’t be overcrowded except on weekends. He could live with that, easily enough.

Stacy’s parents seemed nice enough. That Roy was quite the jokester. Or, maybe he was just older and didn’t have time for foolishness. Roy couldn’t be more than 10 years older than he was. He felt like he was robbing the cradle. Stacy was a corker, too, all 5’6” and 115 pounds of her.

He slipped on a robe and went to the kitchen to make coffee. There was the coffee pot, but where were the filters and coffee? He searched cupboards until he found everything and got the coffee started.

Maybe he should put a propane stove in the new cabin and an electric coffee maker, like this one right here. He still had a couple of questions. Stacy hadn’t said anything about her job at the market. They wouldn’t need the money, but she would have to make that decision. If he could just keep his mouth shut, he had no doubt that Stacy would tell him what she decided.

“That coffee smells delicious,” Stacy said hugging him from behind.

Ray turned to face her. He hugged her tight, but avoided kissing her until he could get rid of the morning breath.

“I’m going to jump in the shower,” he said. “Should I wear the Blazer and slacks or work clothes?”

“They’ve seen your work clothes honey,” Stacy said, “Go for the Blazer and impress them.”

Ray got his shower out of the way, shaved and brushed his teeth. He was standing in the bedroom dressing when Stacy walked in, stripped and walked to the bathroom carrying her robe. Yep. There was a lot he was going to have to get used to. He didn’t have any idea how she could keep so trim a figure working behind a cash register for 8 hours a day. He had to work hard and sometimes exercise to keep the ring of flab from forming around his middle.

Done dressing, Ray went to the kitchen for a cup of the coffee he’d made. He’d better skip breakfast, he thought, he had an idea that Hazel was a great cook. Weren’t all women named Hazel great cooks?

o

After she showered and dressed, Stacy woke Ryan up. Sometimes she thought the boy would end up sleeping his life away. She told Ryan to get showered and dressed; they needed to go over to grandpas for Thanksgiving dinner. Ryan grumbled something about never getting any sleep and rolled out of bed headed for the shower. It always took Ryan about 10 minutes to get fully awake.

Stacy lay out the outfit she wanted Ryan to wear this day despite the fact that he wouldn’t appreciate it one bit, and headed to the kitchen. She noticed that Ray’s hair on the side of his head was growing back out. She had the barber clippers and she liked the looks of a GI haircut. From now on she’d have to trim him up once a week.

Stacy had kept her hair less than shoulder length because of her job. Ray had said something about waist length hair. Well, if he would wear a GI haircut, she would let her hair grow. She got herself a cup of coffee and laid a kiss on Ray that could have started something if they hadn’t had to go to her folks.

“Make you a deal,” Stacy said.

“Am I going to come out ok on this deal?” Ray laughed.

“If you’ll wear a GI haircut,” Stacy offered, “I’ll let my hair grow long. I don’t know about waist length, but longer, for sure.”

"If Ryan decides to stay in town with your folks, I suppose I could get a haircut every Friday," Ray replied.

"Don't waste the money, honey," Stacy said, "I can give you a professional GI haircut; I have the clippers and the practice. I'm not so hot on the flattop, but I can give you a reasonable haircut."

"You are everyman's dream in the bedroom, you are beautiful, you are built like the proverbial brick outhouse, you shoot a pistol like you were born with one in your hand, you can cook like a master chef and you give haircuts?" Ray counted off some of Stacy's more obvious attributes, laughing. "But can you sew?"

"I make about half of my own clothes Ray," Stacy replied with a twinkle in her eye.

"Where have you been all my life?" Ray asked.

"Right here Ray," Stacy smirked, "Just waiting for you to come along."

"Oh, I forgot, you're pretty cunning, too," Ray grinned.

"Had to be to get a catch like you," Stacy purred.

"What are you going to do about your job?" Ray asked. "I'm just curious."

"I thought that Ryan and I would move in with my folks during December and I'd store some of my things," Stacy began her explanation. "I'm going to quit my job effective the day after Christmas. I can't leave Bill in a lurch for the Christmas rush. Meanwhile, I'm going to buy myself a new dress. I hope you won't mind if I don't come down the aisle in a white wedding dress, I've already had that experience."

"Fine by me," Ray said, "I suppose I'm going to have to get myself a new suit. I don't own a suit."

"What's wrong with what you have on?" Stacy asked.

"Nothing," Ray said, "But I thought..."

"Mister, thinking around me will get you in big trouble," Stacy replied. "Wear what you have on. It doesn't make any sense to spend money on a suit you'll probably only wear once."

"But you said you were going to buy a new dress," Ray protested.

"Yes and I'll probably end up wearing it out," Stacy countered.

"What are we going to do about rings?" Ray asked.

“You went to the Jewelry store,” Stacy said. “What did you see that you liked?”

“They had some nice wedding sets,” Ray reported, “But what really caught my eye was a pair of heavily engraved, wide bands. But I suppose you would like a diamond engagement ring, so why don’t we go to the Jewelry store tomorrow and pick one out for you.”

“The engraved band’s sound good to me Ray,” Stacy said, “But we’ll have to go so we can get them sized.”

“I thought that diamonds were a girl’s best friend,” Ray replied a little surprised.

“Every woman should have the white dress, the fancy wedding and the diamond engagement ring once in her life,” Stacy said. “I’ve had mine. We can spend the money on far more useful things than a second diamond or another wedding dress or a fancy church wedding.”

“I knew that there was SOMETHING that I liked about you,” Ray laughed.

“Yeah, my bod,” Stacy countered.

“Well, that too,” Ray tried to save himself.

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Ryan came out dressed in a blue Blazer and tan slacks that nearly mirrored what Ray had on.

“Mom, do I have too?” Ryan asked.

“Just for today Ryan,” Stacy told him.

Ryan grumbled and accepted his Mom’s direction, just for today.

“I’m hungry,” Ryan said.

“Then let’s get to grandpa’s,” Stacy said. “Your grandmother will have fresh caramel rolls and all the food you want to spoil Thanksgiving dinner.”

Stacy turned off the coffee pot and off they went to Grandmother’s house. There was no river to cross or woods to go through, but to Grandmother’s house they went. Ryan promptly took off his Blazer and dived into the food. He was putting away the caramel rolls and milk like he hadn’t eaten in 2 years. Roy was nursing a beer, but Ray opted for coffee.

Stacy pitched in and helped her mother put the finishing touches on Thanksgiving dinner, but her mother had everything well in hand and there wasn't much for her to do except peel the potatoes. That out of the way, Stacy and her mother sat down in the kitchen and had a long, mother-daughter talk.

Stacy outlined her discussion with Ray earlier that morning and their plans. Her mother approved of everything Stacy proposed and said that she would work on Ryan to get him to stay in town until school let out in the spring.

Thanksgiving dinner was something else. There was a small turkey, a small Cure 81 ham, and a standing rib roast. Hazel had prepared several specialty salads, like the pistachio and marshmallow salad, a cranberry salad, and several others. Ray took a little of everything so as not to offend, and he was stuffed.

Ryan was working on his second, or was it third, helping and was going strong. Ray noticed that Stacy took a little of everything, too, if you could call those teaspoon sized helpings a serving. Maybe he had discovered the secret to her figure. (That and a lot of exercise every morning.) They had a great time at Stacy's folks, but it was time to go back to the apartment. Hazel loaded Stacy down with enough leftovers to feed them for a week.

Ryan wasn't long for the world; all of that eating must have worn him out. He told them goodnight and headed to his bedroom. Stacy and Ray put on an old movie on TV and cuddled on the couch late into the evening. It was one of those TEOTWAWKI movies, sort of like the fiction Ray enjoyed by Johnstone.

The movie was scary, and for some reason gave Ray a sense of foreboding. It was nothing he could put his finger on, but it really made him uneasy. Maybe, he thought, he should take extra special care in building that new cabin.

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Stacy had taken the day after Thanksgiving off, just in case. They had breakfast and went to the Jewelry store. Stacy loved the engraved bands that Ray had picked out; they were simple and elegant. They got their fingers measured for the rings and the jeweler told them it would be about a week.

After that, they went shopping. Hazel had suggested that Ray get Stacy the matching Gortex pants and a really good pair of insulated boots. She also hinted that Stacy could use some new underwear, but suggested that Ray handle that with a gift certificate and she would direct Stacy how to use the certificate.

Ray took care of the gift certificate while they were at the store. He also got Stacy to try on the matching pants and boots, but didn't buy them. Stacy dragged Ray to the section of the store that sold western wear and had him try on cowboy hats until she found one that she thought, made the man. She didn't make any purchases either.

They went to a bookstore and Ray bought several 'how to' books on cabin design and construction. He also got a plumbing guide and a guide on alternative energy sources. Stacy thought he was a bit off in the head when he got a publication on preparations for a TEOTWAWKI event, but she didn't say anything.

Ray told Stacy that he really did have to get back to the cabin; Promise was probably going crazy by now. He got his things gathered, went by her folks to pick up his 2 .45's and went back to the store and got the matching pants and insulated boots. Ray supposed that he could have purchased the intimate wear, too, he was fairly certain of Stacy's size, but purchases like that could wait until after they were married.

o

Promise acted like he'd been gone for a month. Even if Ray hadn't shaved that morning, he would not have had a beard after that greeting. He put up the gift wrapped packages for Stacy, put the guns in the gun cabinet and sat down to read the books. For some reason, he was drawn to the TEOTWAWKI book and read it first.

Mountain Man – Chapter 8 – A New Attitude

Ray didn't have a lot to do between now and the wedding. There wasn't a lot he could do with the cabin anyway. He made a note to take his Blazer and slacks in to be dry cleaned and pressed. He needed to get a haircut, but that could wait until just before the wedding. He would pick up the rings when he took his clothes in to the cleaners. If he went to town next Friday, he could drop off the clothes, pick up the rings and maybe, if he got lucky, spend the weekend with Stacy and Ryan.

Then, he could go in the following week and pick up his clothes and, if he got lucky again, spend a second weekend with Stacy and Ryan. He was forgetting something, but he couldn't remember what. He guessed that was why they called it forgetting.

Meanwhile, he was deeply engrossed in the TEOTWAWKI book. The author had made all kinds of suggestions. Some were practical in his circumstances and some were not. For instance, he supposed he could build a double basement, divided by a block wall and cover the roof of the half not under the house with a slab.

They could set a large propane tank and a water tank on the slab if it were properly supported; or, next to the slab, otherwise. The author recommended some place in Utah for an air filtration system and a blast door. Stacy had a whole apartment full of furniture, so they would have plenty of furniture for the shelter.

How would he manage to pay for all of this? Ray had a sneaking suspicion that the stock market, especially those tech stocks that his 401k was so heavily invested in, was going to come tumbling down. It might not be right away, but a fall was looming, of that he was certain. He really gave that some thought. If he cashed out his 401k early, he would have to pay the taxes plus a 10% penalty tax.

On the other hand, if the market crashed, and he was certain that it would, he stood to lose more than the tax and the penalty tax. Well, he was going to cash out that 401k come spring and invest the money in their long-term survival. He was taking on new responsibilities now and he had to look at the long-term. Stacy would just have to understand. Besides, he hadn't told her a lot about his 401k, just that he had one. (It could have been a Keogh Plan, too.)

Ray spent the remainder of the week drawing and planning. He could reuse the 40-gallon hot water heater and what difference did it make if it were in the basement or in the other basement, his shelter? He was going to face the new cabin to the south and cover the south roof with that thin film, electrical generation stuff. He could build a new shed next to the house and mount a solar water-heating array on its roof. He'd have to put in a standby propane powered generator; 12kw was plenty large enough.

If he located the shed just right, the water lines wouldn't have to go any further than they would if they were on the roof of the house, either, especially if he put the hot water heater in the shelter. He could put the water pipes for the washing machine on the wall

dividing the two basements and he'd only have to move the washing machine a few feet to get it to the shelter.

If he used the basement mostly for storage anyway, their food should be safe enough there. Just in case, though, the author recommended buying some long-term storage foods from some place in Idaho named Walton Feed and one in Utah named Emergency Essentials. He would have to look into that. He would have more than enough money, he reasoned, even after all of the taxes.

His 401k investment had to be worth at least 20 times the amount he'd invested and he'd invested the maximum amount he could for all of the years he'd had the plan. He hadn't gotten the government's contributing share because they didn't contribute, but still, he had lived on a buck sergeant's pay for years, building the investment. He hadn't planned on taking a job when he retired from the Army and so far, though he worked hard, he hadn't.

o

Stacy had a million things to get done before the wedding. First there were Christmas presents to get out of the way. She got Ryan the matching Gortex pants and insulated boots like the ones she'd tried on. She picked out the hat for Ray. She'd had to settle for a Resistol brand, but they owned Stetson anyway, didn't they?

Ray still wore combat boots, and western style boots were such an individual fit, that she decided to buy them for him as a wedding present. They could get them after they were married.

Besides, that might take some talking to get Ray to switch from combat boots to western style boots. The wedding dress turned into one of those shop-until-you-drop events, but finally she found the perfect dress. It was plain, but at the same time elegant, and she could wear it for years to come. Her mother had confided to her that she had suggested that Ray get her a gift certificate for new undergarments. Good, she knew that he had bought a \$100 dollar gift certificate and she could get by with only buying a few items.

She got new shoes to go with the dress, but with a low heel, they were dressy and practical. She had rented a storage locker and her Dad would start moving her things the following week. Her cousin was going to help him. Speaking of her cousin, she talked to him about an Arabian Stallion for Ray. If Ray had really ridden all of those years, he should be able to handle the stallion. Her cousin had a 4-year old stallion, but even selling it to her cheap would still be expensive.

She happened to mention this to her mother. Hazel and Roy had talked it over. They were going to be spared the expense of a fancy wedding and they were already paying a fair amount each month to the nephew for cover the cost of boarding the horses. They

had a talk with the nephew and worked out a deal. He would sell them the horse for half the price; the rest would be his wedding present.

Half price was \$2,500; the horse was pure Arabian, but not a show horse. He'd never had the heart to charge them what it really cost to board the 2 mares anyway and he would end up being money ahead in the long run. And, of course, he would help move Stacy's things to the storage facility, what was family for?

Stacy hoped that Ray was coming to town this weekend. She knew he had to get his clothes cleaned and pressed and there were the rings to pick up, if they were ready. The jeweler hadn't had to do much to size the rings, and they were, in fact ready. They had been for several days.

Ryan had announced that he was staying with his grandparents until spring. That was a relief. He'd also announced that he had decided that he was going to West Point, come hell or high water. That pleased Stacy immensely and she told him she was proud of him. He'd have to work hard to maintain his grades if he wanted to make the cut, though.

◦

Ray left for Jackson mid-afternoon on Friday. He'd had all of the time killing that he could stand for this year. He dropped off his clothes, got a haircut, picked up the rings and picked up a new nightgown for Stacy as a wedding present. If the truth were known, it was as much a gift for him as it was for her. It was damned sexy and you could see through the fabric even in the dark. Then again, with nightgowns like that, you never had to spend much time looking through them anyway. They seemed to make it to the floor in record time.

He couldn't show anyone but Stacy that gift, so he also bought her a very elegant floor length nightgown and matching robe. It was definitely not a see-through costume and everyone would probably think he was a little conservative. Good, the world didn't have to know that he was a dirty old man. On the other hand, with someone like Stacy, it was hard not to be a dirty old man.

He arrived at Stacy's apartment at 5:15 pm. He was wearing his next best dress up clothes and he invited Stacy and Ryan out to dinner at the Lodge. He was still well within any dress code the restaurant had and Stacy hadn't really taken anything out for dinner, hoping Ray would show up.

She was just about ready to order pizza when the doorbell rang. She had even taken a chance and ran through the shower and quickly changed from her work clothes to something a little dressier. Ryan was looking forward to a shrimp dinner and he had kept the snacking to a minimum, limiting himself to two sodas and half a package of cookies.

Ray hadn't made a reservation, so they had to wait about 20 minutes to be seated. They went into the bar and had a cocktail, gimlet, bourbon old fashioned and a coke and were ready to be seated when the call came. Ray was in an expansive mood, so he ordered the full bottle of the more expensive Merlot without even consulting with Stacy. They would find a way to get any of the unconsumed wine home. Stacy remembered the Merlot, it was the same brand that Ray had at the cabin. It really was a very good wine.

That was one thing about Ray that was appealing to Stacy. Ray didn't do anything half-way. He was strictly a first class guy in his choices. Just look at those rifles he had, an M-21 and an M-24. His M1911's were both Kimber's and that was as good as you could get. Ray definitely chose first class.

That was one hell of a backhanded compliment of her. Did that mean that she was first-class merchandise too? Even the used guns Ray had bought were good brands and though a little worn, were first class guns. Yep, that was she, a little worn, but a first class broad with a great bod, to quote Ryan and Ray.

After dinner, they went back to the apartment. Stacy had had to leave the hatbox at her Mom's; she didn't want Ray to discover the Christmas present. That was a lot of the fun about Christmas presents anyway, the look on the face of the recipient of the gift. She hoped he would be able to adjust to wearing a cowboy hat; he always wore one of those Army baseball caps. At least he wore a hat, so maybe the adjustment wouldn't be too great.

The cowboy boots would be her greatest challenge. They gripped the foot a lot tighter than those combat boots. She knew, she had a pair in the closet along with a good pair of cowboy boots. They were a leftover from her marriage to Ryan.

Ryan Jr. went to his room and they watched another movie on TV. Was that all the Sci-fi Channel ran, Ray wondered, it was another of the TEOTWAWKI movies. This one didn't frighten him quite so badly; he had already begun to make preparations, at least on paper. After the movie, the two of them retired. They were getting a lot more sleep these days; they lovemaking was maturing, having gotten past the get-all-you-can-get stage. Like most couples, they were going to quality rather than quantity.

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The next morning Stacy had some chores to get done. She got down the box of pictures, mostly from her first marriage and began to go through them. Ray joined her and he could see the strong resemblance between Ryan Sr. and Ryan Jr. Eventually, Stacy got to the pictures from her marriage. Ray didn't seem a bit uncomfortable sharing her memories. However, she noticed that he was beginning to get a strange look on his face. It all came to a head when she showed him the last picture of Ryan. Ryan was dressed in his cammies.

"I met him!" Ray suddenly burst out.

"You did?" Stacy excitedly exclaimed. "Tell me about it."

"I'd rather not, Stacy, I was there when Ryan died," Ray reluctantly replied.

"Ray, the Army never would really give the full details of what happened to my husband. You were there. You owe it to me to tell me what happened," Stacy demanded.

"Let me start out by saying one thing Stacy. Ryan was probably the most heroic man I ever saw in 30 years of Army service," Ray began. "I was in 'Nam and I saw all kinds of heroism, so I have plenty to gauge things by.

"Anyway, it was a fluke. We were up on day 3 of the 4-day campaign that Storming Norman had orchestrated, resupplying. There were thousands of Iraqi prisoners. Someone screwed the pooch and didn't search the prisoners as carefully as they should have. Anyway, one of the prisoners came up with an AK, the ones with the folding stocks, with a 40-round mag.

"He started taking shots at Americans and was wounding most everyone he shot at. Ryan grabbed an M16 and charged into the fray. There were people in the way, so he couldn't get a clear shot. That didn't stop him one bit. Ryan took one round but kept right on going. He was almost on top of the guy before he had a clear shot. He put the guy down and probably saved dozens of lives.

"The guy killed Ryan with a final burst from his AK. The guy had several of the 40-round mags and no one else was even close to him. Yes sir, I've seen plenty of heroic acts in my 30 years, but Ryan topped them all."

Stacy and Ray didn't realize that Ryan was standing in his doorway taking in the whole story.

"I never heard what medal they gave him," Ray said, "But to my thinking, if anyone ever deserved the Congressional Medal of Honor, it was your husband. I can see now why the Congressman was so upset and guaranteed Ryan a choice of military academies. His father was the greatest hero I've ever had the pleasure to meet."

Ryan slipped back into his room. A tear had formed and slid down his cheek. He was very grateful to Ray for telling the story of how his father had died. It really hurt, but at least his father had died saving other peoples' lives. It wouldn't bring his father back.

And he understood now why Ray had so much respect for men and women who had earned the DSC. Maybe some guy above him in the Army had cheated his father out of the CMH, but it didn't matter. He knew the real story now. That was all that mattered. Ryan already thought quite a bit of Ray, but Ray had just gone up a couple of notches in

his book. He would never call him Dad, but Ray obviously didn't expect him to. Ray would make a pretty good substitute Dad, though.

Stacy had tears streaming down her checks. She had always suspected that there were a lot more to the story about how Ryan had died than the Army had let on. Someone, probably some midlevel Army bureaucrat, most likely a Major, was covering their ass because someone hadn't searched the prisoners properly. It was such a waste.

Ryan did die a hero that much was sure. And he died doing what he loved. She wasn't going to press the Army to reopen the matter. Ryan was assured of a military academy appointment so what was the use? She sat there sobbing to herself. Ray, unsure what to do, got up and went to the kitchen and got a cup of coffee. He decided that Stacy needed some time to herself to deal with what he had just told her. He had driven the officers on plenty of those announcements; he'd even made a couple himself. That had changed because of Mrs. Hal Moore.

The wives invariably just needed time to adjust to the news. It might be a little easier on Stacy because so much time separated the event and her learning what really happened. But, the coffee pot was full and he could just sit there and drink coffee until she was ready to have him intrude.

Stacy stared at Ryan's picture for a long time. Then, she put the box back on the shelf and went to Ryan's room. She walked up and hugged Ryan from behind.

"I heard," Ryan said softly, "My Dad was a real hero, wasn't he Mom?"

"Yes Ryan, he really was," Stacy replied.

"I'm glad that Ray told us what happened," Ryan said. "It hurt to hear it, but now we know and Ray really did respect my Dad. Not just because of that ribbon either, but because he saw what Dad did. That's important. Ray is really a good guy, Mom. I'm glad that you're marrying him."

"Me too, Ryan," Stacy said, "More than you can ever know."

"I've got to get out of here for a while, Mom," Ryan said, "Could Ray and you drop me off at grandpas?"

"Sure Ryan," Stacy said, "I've got to get out of here for a while too. I was thinking of taking Ray shopping, would you mind?"

"No Mom, I want to talk to grandpa alone anyway," Ryan replied.

"Get your coat and I'll get Ray," Stacy told Ryan.

Stacy walked to the kitchen and gave Ray a tremendous hug. "Come on, get your coat," she said. "We're dropping Ryan off at his grandfather's and we're going shopping."

"Are you sure..." Ray began.

"Just get your coat Ray Benton and let's get going," Stacy said plainly.

o

They dropped Ryan off at Stacy's parents' home and headed to the store.

"Did I ever tell you what they used to call me around town?" Stacy asked.

"Not that I can recall," Ray responded.

"They used to call me the *Ice Queen*," Stacy said. "I figured it was because I dropped those two possessive SOB's and didn't date any more. Thank you for telling Ryan and me about Ryan, Ray."

"I didn't tell Ryan Stacy," Ray protested.

"He was standing in his doorway and heard the whole story Ray," Stacy said.

"I'm so sorry Stacy," Ray said.

"Don't be Ray," Stacy said, "Ryan heard it at the same time as I did and I can't think of a better way to learn the truth. You just went up a couple of notches in Ryan's eyes, I'm sure. The way you described Ryan's death just made it so much more heroic than it was."

"Ryan was a real hero, Stacy," Ray said, "I didn't make it up."

"I'm sure you didn't Ray," Stacy said, "But you told the event from the eyes of a professional soldier. One who had seen plenty of heroism over 30 years and the awe and regards you held for Ryan was evident. Ryan needed that and so did I. Now, it's time to turn you into a cowboy."

"A cowboy?" Ray sputtered. "Look Stacy, I'm just an old soldier. I don't know how I'd do as a cowboy. Besides, if Ryan..."

"Ryan never was into the cowboy thing Ray," Stacy said, "If that was what you were going to say."

"Well, I had looked at some things, but I held off spending any money because I didn't know what you intended to buy me for Christmas," Ray said.

“No problem Ray,” Stacy said, “We’ll just get you some Wranglers and some shirts. And try on boots to see what you like.”

“Ok.” Ray said, “But those Wranglers are a little tight in the rear.”

“Yeah, I know,” Stacy smirked.

Ray had some ideas about what he wanted in shirts and so did Stacy. Fortunately they agreed on this. When it came to the Wranglers, the 36-34 slims fit him like a glove, but he couldn’t sit down in them. Stacy told him no problem, get the 36-34 regulars, they’d shrink up pretty good and fit like slims after they were washed. Good, slims were tight in the front and the rear.

They also tried on boots and Ray found a pair he really liked. He was going to buy them but Stacy resisted. He began to insist and she told him she wanted to buy them for him as a wedding present. Just to make sure that she could get that very pair of boots, she bought them right on the spot but said he would have to wait until they were married before they were his.

“I bought you a wedding present, too” Ray mentioned.

“Let me guess,” Stacy said. “It’s totally transparent, probably even in the dark and even though its clothing won’t be worn very long. Right?”

“I bought one of those, too,” Ray admitted. “But I actually bought you a wedding present that we can show to other people.”

“Do tell,” Stacy said.

“You’ll have to wait until the wedding,” Ray countered.

“That’s not fair,” Stacy said, “You know what you’re getting for a wedding present.”

“Tough,” Ray said.

◦

Hazel had invited them for dinner. Stacy promptly took the new jeans and shirts to wash them. Roy had obviously been talking with Ryan and he had sort of a strange look in his eye.

“I understand from Ryan that you were there when his father died,” Roy said.

“Yes Roy, I was,” Ray replied.

"It was good of you to tell Ryan and Stacy how Ryan died," Roy said. "There had always been questions that hadn't been answered."

"I didn't mean to tell Ryan, Roy, but Stacy said it was ok," Ray responded.

"With Stacy knowing," Roy replied, "He was bound to find out sooner or later. I think it was better coming from you since you were an eyewitness. From the way Ryan tells the story, he couldn't have had a better narrator."

"I was in the Army for 30 years Roy," Ray said, "I've seen a lot of men die. If I would have had to die in combat, I can't think of a better way to go."

"That says a lot Ray, Thank you," Roy replied. "You know you are a lot like Ryan in many ways and different in others. That's neither good nor bad, it's just a fact. I'd say that Stacy got herself a real winner both times."

"Thank you," Ray mumbled.

"So, Ryan tells me that he has decided to stay with us until spring," Roy continued. "How about we bring him out on Friday nights and you bring him back on Sunday afternoons?"

"It's no trouble for me to pick him up Roy," Ray said.

"No, of course not, Ray," Roy responded, "But Hazel and I would like to see the cabin. Besides, I understand that you have an old bottle of bourbon and some excellent Merlot."

"Darn, I completely forgot to pick up the beef from the locker plant," Ray said.

"Huh?" Roy replied.

"Oh, sorry," Ray said, "I took my steer in to be butchered before the blizzard and I completely forgot to pick up the meat. Your mentioning the Merlot triggered the memory because Merlot goes really well with a good steak."

"You got room in your freezer for a whole beef?" Roy asked.

"I'm not sure Roy," Ray answered.

"The reason I asked is because Hazel and I have an old 21-cubic foot chest-type freezer in the basement that we quit using three years ago. If it still runs, you're welcome to it."

"Even if it doesn't run Roy," Ray said, "I welcome it. It wouldn't take too much to get it to work."

After dinner, they went to the basement and plugged the freezer in. The compressor seemed to work okay, but after an hour, the freezer wasn't cold. Ray said it probably just had a Freon leak, would Roy mind if he had a serviceman come out and look at it? Roy said no problem and either way, he'd be rid of the freezer. Ray decided to leave the meat at the locker plant for another week, but he did stop by and pay for the butchering, cutting and wrapping. They went back to the apartment and Ryan headed to bed.

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"Your Dad really appreciated my letting Ryan know how his father died," Ray said.

"Ray, we both appreciate it," Stacy replied. "There is no more mystery and we know that Ryan died in a worthwhile manner. People die in wars. It was a shame it had to be Ryan, but at least his death wasn't wasted on some friendly fire incident or anything."

"I think that freezer just needs a Freon leak repaired," Ray said. "Would you have time to call a serviceman on Monday, or should I do it?"

"I'll take care of it," Stacy said. "I talked to my cousin about buying you a horse for a wedding present, but he wanted too much money."

"A horse?" Ray asked, "Does that mean you already have a horse?"

"Two actually, they are 4-year old Arabian mares," Stacy said. "Mom's brother gave them to Ryan and me as 2 year olds. We have the tack and everything. Really nice hand tooled leather."

"Arabians must cost a fortune Stacy," Ray said. "I'm glad you didn't spend any money on a horse for me. At least not THAT much money."

"It would have been nice to have a stallion for you Ray," Stacy said. "Then we could have bred the mares and started to raise horses."

"It sounds like I need to add a barn to my building plans," Ray said. "I've been planning on talking to you about this anyway Stacy. I mentioned that I have a 401k plan, right?"

"Yes," Stacy said, "What about it?"

"My plan is heavily invested in the tech sector," Ray said. "My investment is over 20 times what I put in. I think the tech sector is about through with its run. I've calculated and if I cash out my plan and pay the taxes and the penalty tax, I'll probably still be money ahead; a lot of money ahead. So, I'm going to cash it out around April. I just wanted you to know because once we're married, half the plan will be yours."

"It's your investment Ray," Stacy said, "You do what you think is right."

“Those TEOTWAWKI movies we’ve been watching on the Sci-Fi Channel have gotten me to thinking too,” Ray said.

“Those what?” Stacy asked.

“Oh, TEOTWAWKI stands for The End Of The World As We Know It,” Ray explained. “Bush never took care of Saddam after the Gulf War and it looks like his kid might make a run for President. If that happens, I half expect Bush Junior to go after Saddam.”

“What excuse could he come up with to do that?” Stacy asked.

“I have no idea,” Ray said, “But maybe violations of the No-Fly Zone. Who knows? Then again, maybe Gore will win the election. He wouldn’t go to war; he’s too busy inventing the Internet.”

“So what does that have to do with your building plans?” Stacy asked.

“I figure that it won’t cost me that much more to dig a double wide hole for a basement and put in a double basement,” Ray said. “I could put a wall down the length, dividing the two basements and we could use the basement under the house for laundry, the furnace and storage. We could put your extra furniture in the other half and have a sort of a bomb shelter.”

“Bomb shelter?” Stacy laughed. “Who would bomb Jackson, Wyoming?”

“Then call it a storm shelter if you prefer,” Ray said.

“You sound so like Ryan at times,” Stacy said. “He always wanted to put in a storm shelter, too. We never did because we were never in one place long enough.”

“Then you don’t mind?” Ray asked.

“No, go build your bomb shelter Ray Benton,” Stacy said. “But if bombs ever fall on Jackson Hole Valley, Wyoming, it will all be your fault.”

Mountain Man – Chapter 9 – An Old Friend

Sunday was quiet and Ray could see that Stacy had a lot to do. He offered to help, but she suggested that he go home, that would be the biggest help. Having him around was, well, distracting. If he were gone, she could concentrate of getting stuffed packed. It made sense to him and even if it hadn't, Ray would have left just because she asked.

Promise wasn't taking to his being gone all that much anyway and when he'd left Friday afternoon, he could hear her howling from the Ford, over the motor. He headed home to spend some catch up time with his dog.

When he got home, Ray didn't even turn on the computer for a while. It didn't take all that long to get back in Promise's good graces anyway. It wasn't so cold that particular day so he took her for a walk. After marking her territory in a dozen different places, Promise was either cold or out of urine, maybe both. She headed back to the cabin with Ray bringing up the rear. That seemed to be the way with the women in his life. They made up their mind and off they went; damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead.

With Promise settled by the fireplace, Ray restocked his supply of wood, bringing it from the furthest stack. While he was at it, he moved some from the same stack to the porch so the porch was full. He'd already gone through about 2 cords, but he'd been keeping the cabin warmer than in prior years. Maybe it was old age setting in, or maybe it was Promise. Who knew? Anyway you sliced it; he had enough firewood until spring. That was good, because gathering firewood in this part of the country was a miserable experience for a man by himself during the winter.

To keep fit during the idle months of the winter, Ray usually spent an hour doing exercises each morning. After his first cup of coffee, he'd do some pushups, some sit-ups, some jumping jacks and some pull-ups from one of the exposed joists. It maybe wasn't the best in the world, but by doing it an hour every morning that he could, he managed to stay in pretty good shape. Although Ray had been trained in hand-to-hand combat, he wasn't any sort of expert in any particular discipline.

Ray had done a smattering of amateur fighting when he'd gotten back from 'Nam, but had dropped it in favor of furthering his education. Getting those degrees in night school had taken most of the remaining 30 years. And, getting those degrees in night school had been the difference that had gotten him the promotion to E-9 early.

But, if push came to shove, Ray had a pretty mean uppercut. Properly executed, the uppercut is a devastating punch. Landed just right, you could lift a person off his feet and land him on his butt, unconscious. Ray always included a few practice boxing swings so that if he had to he could throw a hook, cross, jab or that devastating uppercut. He hadn't actually thrown a punch since he'd moved to Wyoming. There had been no need, he lived out in the sticks and didn't frequent bars.

Ray was finalizing the plans for the cabin. Although he didn't need to, he decided to build the foundation 12' deep and the basement floor 11' deep. That made for a taller basement, hence more storage space. It also allowed him to pack 3' of earth over the other basement if he built it with a 7½' ceiling and a 6" thick slab roof.

Stacy's crack about the bomb shelter had gotten him to thinking. As far as he knew, the Minuteman III's were located at F.E. Warren AFB, WY; Minot AFB and Grand Forks AFB, ND; and Malmstrom AFB, MT. That meant that the closest site was over 200 miles away in Great Falls. Regardless, he figured he should have about 3' of earth over his storm shelter. Ray found a spreadsheet on the net and they'd need 7' of earth cover to total protection and more was better.

For the shed to get the best heating effect for the water, it had to have a south-facing roof, too. If he built the shed right at the east end of the second basement, it would be set back from the cabin a little and out of the cabin's shade.

Now, there was a barn to think about because Stacy had horses. He still wasn't going to raise hogs, no way, but that meant that he could put in a dairy cow or two. Whether he liked it or not, it looked like he was going to become a farmer. Not a big farmer, after all, how much farming could one do on 40-acres, but a farmer nonetheless.

And there were the chickens. Maybe he could incorporate a hen house into the barn and fence an area for the chickens to run around in. He remembered someone in the Army talking about raising chickens and they talked about clipping the wings to keep the chickens from flying. He had no idea what that was all about, but he could find out when he bought the baby chickens.

Ray searched the net using the term barn plans and came up with a whole evenings worth of listings. You could buy a plan; you could buy a pre-cut, unassembled barn; you could buy a pre-cut assembled in sections barn, and you could hire someone to build a barn for you.

Ray didn't even know how big of a barn he would need for 2-3 horses, a couple of milk cows, a steer or two and some chickens. It was a shame none of his neighbors were Amish, they knew how to build barns! Roy had not been a farmer, but plenty of Stacy's relatives were ranchers or farmers. Ray would have to ask them.

o

Bert Rumples, one of the men Stacy had dated and dumped when he became possessive heard a rumor around Jackson that Stacy was engaged. Some old retired Army Fart, he'd heard. Damn her hide anyway. Although it had been 3 years since Stacy had dumped him, he still had the hots for that redhead. He'd called her up to discuss the rumor, but as soon as she'd heard his voice, she had hung up. Uppity bitch! Bert was a nice looking guy, or so some women had told him, but he couldn't seem to hold on to one for very long.

Stacy had been the first in a long succession of women who had bedded him but had soon grown tired of his possessiveness and dumped him. Somehow, in his mind, Bert had conjured up the belief that it was all Stacy's fault. She had probably gone around telling his latest girlfriend to dump him.

Yeah, that was it. Anyway, Bert hadn't been able to get a date for over a year and he blamed Stacy. That was quite a complex set of feelings, especially for a guy like Bert. He hated the woman he thought he was in love with. Bert had no idea that love and lust weren't the same thing.

Bert had lost his job the week that he'd heard about the engagement. Bert, you see, had a bit of a problem with alcohol. Well, between losing his job (because of drinking) and losing the love of his life, Bert was finding solace at the local tavern. He'd even been turned down for unemployment insurance because he'd been fired for cause. He'd appeal the unemployment insurance rejection, by God, and he was going to give Stacy a piece of his mind. Just as soon as he had one more drink, that is.

◦

Stacy had been tempted to call Ray after she'd had the call from Bert. It sounded like Bert had been drinking again, so she hung up on him. Of the two men she'd dated and thought had some possibilities, Bert had been the latter. But, Bert was by far the more possessive of the two men and after she'd dumped him Stacy learned that he had a drinking problem too.

Stacy hadn't said anything to anyone about Bert's drinking problem, it was only a rumor, but every once in a great while, Bert would lose another girlfriend, either because of his drinking or possessiveness or both and would get boozed up and call her. She'd always handled the calls the same way. The minute he slurred a word, she'd hung up. Anyway, Stacy got busy and forgot to call Ray.

◦

Ray needed a couple of things from the market so he left around 4:00. He'd called the locker plant and they were open on Sunday afternoons, so he could pick up his meat on the way home on Sunday. He was dying to see Stacy and Ryan, but especially Stacy.

Anyway, Ray arrived at the grocery store a couple of minutes after five. When he got out of his truck, he saw a man and woman in front of the store, apparently arguing. As he got closer, Ray could see that the woman was Stacy. The guy was loud, and quite possibly had been drinking. He had grabbed Stacy's arm a couple of times, too, but she had jerked away. Was he one of Stacy's former boyfriends, perhaps? Ray picked up his step and was beside the couple in moments.

"Excuse me," Ray said, "What seems to be going on here?"

Stacy was relieved to see Ray, but she was in old Bert's face pretty good, telling him a thing or two or three. She shut up to let Ray handle Bert.

"What business is it of yours?" Bert slurred.

"My name is Ray Benton and I'm..." Ray started to explain what business it was of his.

"I don't give a flying flip what your name is," Bert said. "I asked what business it is of yours? Take a hike pal, can't you see I'm talking to the lady."

By this time, Stacy was relaxing and becoming amused. She knew that if Ray lost it, old Bert was in for the surprise of his life. A smile began to form on her lips.

"Watch the mouth buddy," Ray said. "I'm her fiancé, that's what business it is of mine. Now what's going on here, I asked."

"So you're the old retired Army Fart she's going to marry, huh?" Bert slurred again. "Well I am not impressed Mr. Army man so why don't you take a hike."

Bert didn't seem to be seeing anything too clearly, or he would have seen that his continued use of profanity was setting Ray off. The guy wasn't backing down and Bert failed to notice the right hand curl into a fist. Bert took a swing at the guy. Ray blocked the clumsily thrown punch and brought that uppercut from halfway to the ground.

It happened so fast that Stacy almost missed it. As it happened, a patrol car from the Sheriff's department turned the corner in time to miss the punch Bert threw but in time to see the uppercut. Bert must have sailed 2 or 3 feet, so solidly did Ray land the punch. The Deputy hit the siren a blast and pulled to a stop. He'd seen the punch and the guy was on the ground. The other fella and Stacy were just standing there. With barely a word, the deputy began to cuff Ray.

Stacy began to protest immediately. The Deputy went to check the guy on the ground. It was Bert Rumples and he stank like a brewery. The Deputy took Ray to his car and semi-politely put Ray in the back seat and called for an ambulance for Bert. Then he went to take Stacy's statement.

Stacy was in his face big time, and from what he could piece together, Bert had accosted Stacy when she came out of work and the guy in the back seat, Ray Benton her fiancé, had come to her rescue. Bill came out of the store and confirmed everything that Stacy had told the Deputy. The Deputy went to the car and asked Ray to step out.

"I'm sorry Mr. Benton, but with Bert on the ground and everything, I had to cuff you," the Deputy apologized, removing the cuffs.

“No harm, no foul, Deputy,” Ray said. “He took a swing at me and I was just defending myself.”

“Did a pretty good job of it too,” the Deputy acknowledged.

By this time, Bill had gone back inside and Stacy was hanging on to Ray’s arm. The ambulance had arrived and other than being drunk and trying to overcome a superbly thrown uppercut, Bert was fine. He didn’t need any medical attention. The Deputy put his cuffs on Bert and led him to the car.

He wasn’t nearly as polite when he put Bert in the back seat and poor old Bert thumped his head on the door crawling into the car and promptly threw up all over the backseat. Damn it; first he’d arrested the wrong guy, detained actually, and now this drunk had puked on his back seat. The Deputy decided to let Bert roll around in the vomit and shut the door on Bert and headed for the station with all of the cars windows down.

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“Remind me to never piss you off,” Stacy laughed.

“I’d never hit a woman Stacy,” Ray protested. “And I wouldn’t have hit him if he hadn’t taken a swing at me.”

“My knight in shining armor,” Stacy teased.

“I was going to suggest that we go out to dinner Stacy,” Ray said. “But if you’re going to make fun of me...”

“Come on, you have a thicker skin than that Ray Benton,” Stacy said. “What brought you to the store anyway?”

“Oh, I needed a couple of things and thought I’d catch you and follow you home,” Ray explained.

“Well, here’s what I think of your rescue efforts,” Stacy said and planted one on Ray that almost sent him into orbit. “Come on, let’s get those items you need and pick up Ryan.”

Ray needed a jar of yeast and a can of baking powder. For this, he’d almost ended up in jail. Well, not really, but the Deputy was plenty pissed at old Bert. Bert could spend the whole weekend sleeping this one off and if he couldn’t get the stink out of the backseat covers, old Bert was buying the Sheriff’s department a new set of seat covers.

It didn’t bother the Deputy one bit the old Bert just happened to hit his head on the car door getting out of the car and they had to drag old Bert into a cell. Ever seen the movie *First Blood* where they gave Rambo a shower? Old Bert got the fire hose treatment too.

He stank too badly for anyone to get close to him. Good old Bert was so drunk he wouldn't even remember. Anything.

o

Ray followed Stacy over to her folks. Stacy insisted that he come inside and she promptly began to relate what had happened at the grocery store. Ray gained one more notch on Ryan's scale. Roy looked at Ray and winked. Ray just stood there stoically through the whole event.

They left for the apartment so Stacy could clean up and change and Ray could call for a reservation. The reservation was for 7:30 so Ryan helped himself to two sodas and another half package of cookies. Ray noticed that most of Stacy's stuff was gone. He had it in mind that she was supposed to move this week, but something must have come up. Stacy came out wearing a really nice dress that highlighted her figure to its uppermost. Nice.

In the car on the way to the Lodge, Stacy said, "Dad has been down in the back Ray, would you mind terribly helping move my things to storage tomorrow?"

"Be glad to honey," Ray said. "Why didn't you call me?"

"Well, my cousin can't get into town until tomorrow, so it didn't make much difference," Stacy explained.

The subject of Bert didn't come up again that evening. They sat down at the table and Ray really was looking forward to the drink. Maybe two. Ryan had grown weary of Shrimp, at least on this night and ordered the small filet, as did Stacy. Ray was into his second drink by the time the waitress took their order and he decided to just get the small filet, too.

He didn't like to fight unless he had to. That he hadn't been able to reason with a drunk was no excuse. Ray didn't have much of an appetite. Stacy noticed, but didn't say anything. Was this connected to one of those warts she hadn't been able to discover or was Ray just regretting the need to resort to violence? Either way, it didn't make him any less of a man in her eyes.

Ray asked about wine, but Stacy could sense that he didn't really want any so she declined. The brief look of relief in Ray's eyes told her she had made the right decision. Between his two drinks, loss of appetite and not wanting the wine, Stacy knew that her man needed a little space. Whatever it was that was bothering Ray, he could bring it up in his own time.

He afforded her that respect and was entitled to the same from her. Ray, for his part, was happy that he hadn't put any more into that uppercut. An uppercut could be deadly,

under the right circumstances. It could even break a man's neck on a very rare occasion. Ray knew all about that, too.

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When they got back to the apartment, Ray could see that Stacy had already moved most of her things. The only things in the kitchen were the other half bag of cookies and two sodas in the refrigerator plus the coffee pot, some filters, a can of coffee and 2 mugs. Well, he'd treat for breakfast, he decided. The closets were all but empty, too.

No doubt with the shortage of rental housing in Jackson, the apartment would be repainted and reoccupied within a few days. Stacy still had TV, so they put on another Sci-Fi channel movie. It was another of the TEOTWAWKI movies, but this one was such a farce it actually brightened Ray's mood. By the time they were ready to go to bed; Ray had put away his demon and was ready to ravish his lovely.

Ray didn't know why Stacy had picked December 28, 1999 for their wedding. Surely she knew that the 28th was a Tuesday. Stacy did, but Christmas was on Saturday the 25th and New Years on Saturday January 1, 2000. She didn't want to get married on her birthday and she figured if they got married the day after her birthday, it might be easier for Ray to remember.

Ryan was wrong. Having a birthday 3 days after Christmas and an Anniversary the day after meant she was triple dipping. It also meant that people tended to combine gifts and over the course of a year, she tended to get fewer gifts than the average person. That was ok; some people used it as an excuse to go all out and over bought. Maybe it evened out.

◦

The next morning all three of them were up early. They all cleaned up and Ray took them to breakfast. When they got back from the restaurant, Stacy's cousin Michael was waiting. Michael and Ray loaded each of their pickups and made one of many trips to the storage locker. While they were gone, Stacy and Ryan took a load to her mother's. So it went for the morning.

Ray sprang for lunch, it was the least that he could do and they got back to the moving. By 4pm everything was either in the storage locker or at Stacy's mothers. Ray filled Michael's tank and joined Stacy, Ryan and her folks for dinner.

The freezer had had a small leak and was working perfectly. Michael knew this because Stacy had mentioned it and he followed Ray back to his aunt's house and helped Ray load the freezer into Ray's pickup.

Stacy was going to go back the next afternoon and do some final cleaning on the apartment so she could get her deposit back. Every penny counted and she wasn't will-

ing to give up a month's rent, the amount of the security deposit, just because she didn't want to clean up the apartment one more time. Ray would leave at the same time, pick up the beef and head back to the cabin.

Stacy's folks weren't prudish by any means, but Ray noticed that they had a bedroom prepared for each of the three of them in the old house. He wasn't about to defy convention, especially since Hazel had gone to the trouble of fixing him a room so Stacy and he slept separately that night. It really wasn't a big deal, he was pretty tired from the moving anyway and was asleep moments after going to bed.

The next morning Hazel had a large breakfast prepared with sausage, bacon, eggs, pancakes and toast. Ray noticed that Stacy took one egg, one piece of sausage, one strip of bacon, one small pancake and no toast. Yep, she ate light to maintain that figure.

Ray was really getting to like Roy. He understood why Ryan idolized his grandfather. He also had a pretty good idea where Stacy had learned to cook. He and Roy visited while Stacy and her mother did the dishes. Ryan was busy finishing up his homework. He only had 3 days of school left before Christmas break.

Visiting with Roy made Ray realize that in all of the excitement of getting ready for the wedding he'd never given a thought to a birthday present for Stacy. Well, maybe he could get by with something simple and another gift certificate. He loved gift certificates; they made picking out presents so much simpler.

Besides, time was short and he didn't have a clue what to buy her. He had noticed an empty bottle of Chanel No 5 on Stacy's dresser and he managed to get Hazel alone long enough to find out that Stacy adored the perfume but never bought it because it was so very expensive.

After a light lunch, Stacy and Ryan headed to the apartment and Ray headed to the store. With it being so close to Christmas, he expected the store would be open. It was, but he almost had a heart attack when saw the prices. The perfume was \$250 for 3.4 oz. bottle and the spray perfume purse atomizer was \$75. The sales lady mentioned that they were a lot cheaper than the big stores like Macy's who got \$380 and \$85 respectively. She also told him that perfume got old.

Ray went with the spray and a \$50 gift certificate. He had the package wrapped and headed to the locker plant. The meat was in baskets so they loaded the baskets onto some carts and hauled it to the pickup. Ray emptied the baskets into the freezer and headed for the cabin. He knew that when he got home, he had a major job ahead of him. He would have to empty the meat out of the freezer, somehow move it to the shed and put the meat back in the freezer.

When Ray got home, he spent some time with Promise so she would leave him alone for his big chore. When she settled down by the fireplace, Roy got some empty card-

board boxes and transferred the meat to the boxes. He managed to get the freezer into the shed by backing the pickup right up to the door and sliding it off. He pushed it to the only available space, and started to dump the meat. He was too tired to fool around sorting it, but he managed to get most of the steaks on one end, the roasts in the middle and the ground meat on the other end.

He plugged in the freezer and headed to the cabin where he collapsed into an easy chair. He must have dozed off because the next thing he knew Promise was licking his hand and whining to be let out. He let her out, added a log to the fireplace, let her back in, undressed and went to bed. He was mentally and physically exhausted.

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Back in the days after he'd gotten home from 'Nam, Ray had been a fighter for a while. One of the principle reasons he'd quit fighting was that in his last fight he'd thrown an uppercut on his opponent that came from the floor. The opponent was apparently caught totally unawares because Ray had hit him just right and broken the guy's neck.

It wasn't a serious enough fracture to hurt the guy permanently, but he wore a brace until the cracked vertebrae had healed. It had been one of those one in a million or one in ten million shots, but Ray carried the baggage. That was why he had been so upset when old Bert had gone down. He had been afraid he'd broken the guy's neck.

Ray was expected to be at the Benton home at 10am on Christmas morning. He would remain there until after the wedding on Tuesday. A minor reception was planned for the Benton home (the parents) after the wedding. Then he and his new bride would return to the cabin. Roy and Hazel would bring Ryan out the first Friday after school resumed in January, weather permitting.

The barbershop would only be open until noon on Friday, so Ray planned to get a room at the motel and spend Friday night there. He concentrated on making sure the cabin was clean, had clean sheets on the bed and was ready for his bride. Using the washing machine for the first and he hoped only, time had been an experience. The space heater was now on its second bottle of propane. He threw the empty bottle in the back of the pickup to get it filled on Friday.

He had waited until Thursday to do the laundry and had clean sheets on the bed and the spare set clean on top of the wardrobe. Rather than mess up the sheets, Ray slept in his easy chair Thursday night. Ray hadn't bothered to shave all week; he hoped the barber was up to giving him a shave on Saturday.

Roy spent lots of time with Promise on Friday. It would be their last time alone together. He checked and rechecked. He had clothes in the Ford, the rings in his pocket, Stacy had the marriage license, and he had plenty of cash and his checkbook. He guessed he was as ready as he was going to get and set off for Jackson.

The wedding license had almost ruined their plans. He hadn't given it a thought and if Stacy hadn't remembered and given him a call and gotten him to rush back into town on Tuesday, they would have been up the creek. Thank goodness Jackson was the county seat and there was no waiting period. Well, they could have gotten it on Monday, but Monday was Stacy's birthday. And, Stacy didn't do flattops, so this trip to the barber was necessary.

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Stacy was on a break from the store and saw Ray go into the barbershop. She walked right into the shop and saw Ray waiting to get a haircut.

"I told you I would give you your haircuts from now on," Stacy said.

"You don't do flattops Stacy and I wanted to look sharp for Tuesday," Ray responded.

"Fair enough," Stacy replied, "Are you driving back to the cabin?"

"Thought I'd just get a motel room," Ray replied.

"You'll do no such thing," Stacy replied. "I'll see you at Moms when I get off work. I'll be a little late, this is my last day."

"Got another hot date, huh?" Ray kidded.

"Short going away party and picking up the last paycheck," Stacy said, "I won't be more than 30 minutes late. Do you want to come to the party?"

"Thanks, but no," Ray said, "I'll just visit with your Dad and Ryan."

"Ok, see you around 5:30," Stacy said and left to get back to work.

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The barber heard the exchange. Barbers hear everything. He took extra special pains to get that flattop just right and the shave close.

"So you're the guy that Stacy latched on to?" the barber asked.

"Yes sir," Ray replied, out of habit.

"Then you'd be the fella that laid that uppercut on old Bert?" the barber pressed.

"Afraid so," Ray admitted.

“Bert has always thought he was God’s gift to women and he’s possessive as hell,” the barber laughed. “Got himself a drinking problem now too. Talk around town is that he’s blamed Stacy for every relationship he’s had since her going south on him. Truth is it was probably his possessiveness and drinking.

“Anyway, the judge fined him \$250 plus court costs plus the costs of a new set of seat covers. Came to \$750 and Bert couldn’t come up with the money. Judge is letting him serve it off at \$10 a day. Maybe he will get dried out and sober up. You probably did Bert a big favor by cold cocking him like that. I’ve known Roy for 50 years and he really thinks highly of you. Haircut and shave are on the house, by the way. Call it a wedding present.”

Ever been in a barbershop where the barber just couldn’t stop talking? Yeah, me too, but I never got a free haircut or shave out of the deal!

Stacy wasn’t home until 5:45. Her final check was pretty good sized because of the accumulated vacation and sick leave. She also had a Christmas bonus check and it was very nice. “Maybe,” Ray thought, “I should get a job at the grocery store.”

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Hazel had put on a beef roast and it was more than enough to include Ray.

“You did remember to bring the marriage license?” Stacy asked.

Ray almost choked on his mouthful of roast beef. When he was able to talk, he managed to get out, “But you kept the license Stacy!”

“Gottcha,” Stacy laughed, with a twinkle in her eye.

“Mom, that’s not fair,” Ryan was laughing. “Ray almost choked on his roast beef. You should wait to choke him until after you’re married.”

“What?” Ray wondered, “Have I gotten myself into?”

Ray was getting into a family with a sense of humor. Something, it would turn out, that would serve him well 4½ years down the road when Ryan was a Senior in High School and Ray read that article in the LA Times on the net. Remember that article about the bird taking out the power at LAX?